

**FALLACIOUS FLIGHTS : A STUDY OF THE THEME OF  
MORAL CHOICE IN SELECTED WORKS OF EDITH  
WHARTON, THEODORE DREISER AND  
WILLIAM FAULKNER**

**A Thesis Submitted  
In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

*By*  
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to the  
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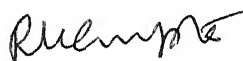
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to the  
inspiring memory  
of  
my father  
and to  
my mother

## CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled "Fallacious Flights: A Study of the Theme of Moral Choice in Selected Works of Edith Wharton, Theodore Dreiser and William Faulkner" submitted by Avantika Rohatgi in partial fulfilment of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy to the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur, is a record of bonafide research work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance. The results embodied in the thesis have not been submitted to any other University or Institute for the award of any degree or diploma.



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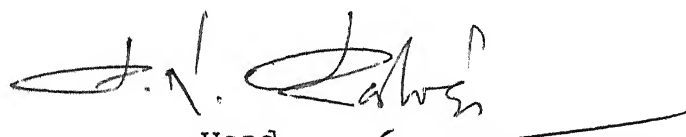
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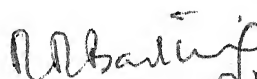
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## SYNOPSIS

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Edith Wharton, Theodore Dreiser and William Faulkner, were in their own unique way precursors of an era of revolt against established codes of conduct. They were decried and labelled "naturalists," "determinists" and "heretics" by those who influenced critical opinion at the time. But the fact is that these so-called moral "rebels," though often critical of "existing" norms, almost always advocated "eternal" norms. In an era of ethical chaos these writers upheld the moral dignity of man. According to them, man is by no means "a puppet of forces" and circumstances beyond his control or the victim of a predetermined destiny. They believed that real dignity lies in man's ability to recognise that his future is a set of alternatives open to an intelligent and responsible choice. Through an analysis of the all-important theme of moral choice in these writers, this study aims at assessing their moral philosophy and bringing out the profound moral vision which in the last analysis controls various aspects of their fiction.

Wharton's best-known works, The House of Mirth, Ethan Frome and The Age of Innocence reveal her pre-occupation with man's moral freedom. In these works, Wharton chooses the themes of man's refusal to submit himself to a preordained pattern of life, his desire to throw off communal restraint and to defy moral obligation. In The Fruit of the Tree, Wharton boldly raises the question of the propriety of euthanasia. Each of her protagonists knowingly and responsibly elects a moral course of action. A study of the consequences of these actions brings out Wharton's belief that man can achieve real happiness only through conformity to moral norms. An action in violation of them can only lead to guilt and suffering.

Dreiser's major works, Sister Carrie, Jennie Gerhardt and An American Tragedy — often described as works of "barbaric naturalism" and "anarchic ethic," have in reality a wealth of moral meaning. The themes no doubt are non-conformist: moral compromise is used by Carrie and Jennie as a means toward economic and emotional security; Witla indulges in pursuit of the senses as an attempt toward fulfillment; for Cowperwood and Clyde wealth is the most significant end. In pursuit of their narrow and selfish ends, these characters show complete lack of concern for other people's rights. However, Dreiser emphatically shows that in each case a choice against the dictates of conscience offers little else than alienation, sorrow and remorse.

Faulkner, one of the most complex authors of the present century, is as much concerned with man's moral limits in his

lessor-known works as in his famous ones. Sanctuary, Requiem for A Nun, The Wild Palms as much as Light in August portray the emergence of all-pervasive hidden desires of man, which, when allowed to dominate, can lead to destruction of self and society. Oppression, fanaticism, rape, violence, murder, suicide — all are examples of man's conscious election of self-destructive evil, leaving in its wake pain, sorrow, doom and death.

[The conclusion of this study is that these three writers have a deep and obsessive concern with man's moral condition. Though they uninhibitedly deal with man's hidden fears and desires, they do not advocate an indulgence in them. Man, for them, is the conscious architect of his own destiny and can build or destroy his life depending on the choice he makes. A decision to abide by the established codes of conduct, to obey one's conscience rather than the demands of the instinct, to have a tender concern for the welfare and happiness of others is the only means of achieving true and lasting contentment in a world torn by strife and despair.

Through an analysis and exposition of the moral philosophies in the selected works of Wharton, Dreiser and Faulkner, this study seeks to modify the prevailing interpretation of their vision of life and of the human condition. With due emphasis on the complex struggle between the conflicting tendencies in man these writers have tried to project man's ability to create for himself a Dante's Inferno or a More's Utopia, depending on the moral choice he makes. In the process is revealed the writers' utmost faith in man's power of reasoning and in his essential goodness.



## INTRODUCTION

### THE AWARENESS OF POWER

Life is a priceless gift of God to man. In his zest for living and in his joy of living he rambles through various avenues, searches for various goals. In the jargon of the present-day, he enunciates various "isms." But the basic question remains—What does man ultimately seek? What is his quest? Whether he amasses knowledge or wealth, power or pelf, what does he wish to gain by possessing these? What to him, is the Summum Bonum, after all?

The answer is not far to seek. The chimera which beckons to man is always one and the same—HAPPINESS. It may lead men through diverse paths, but its ultimate realization is the sole motive force in life's long endeavour. It is this search that at times leads him through Paths Untrodden, and then, he is confronted with censure and calumny. Torn and pulled apart by fulfillment on one hand and commitment on the other, he stands confused and confounded, and branded, a case of neurosis.

Problems of adjustment have never been so numerous as in modern times. Psychiatry booms and the voice of protest against it has faded to a whisper or to a neurotic whine. A major cause has been the influence of Freud, Jung and Reich. Men in conformity with the views of these psychologists tended to consider themselves aggregates of material particles whose behaviour is the result of "drives," "impulses," "chemical

imbalances" or "childhood frustrations." The result was that therapy replaced personal responsibility and psychoanalysis, in vain, sought to justify mental agony and hidden guilt which followed a disregard of established norms.

The philosophy of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche (Death of God) and Sartre (assertion of man's freedom), were other factors leading to a moral crisis in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These thinkers declared man to be free, to do what he thought was right and thence to create his own values. The result was confusion, anger, rebellion, mental turmoil, despair and moral anarchy.

Literature too seemed to offer no alleviation. It was simply a reflection of the dilemma of man. The mission of writers therefore became to ignore or simply reproduce the crisis, not to wrestle with it until they could forge a way forward. Literature has the power to cause revolutions. It was then, and it is even now, imperative for our literary leaders to re-instil hope in despairing mankind. Let us therefore consider what our modern literateurs desire. Do they merely instigate rebellion, advocate an assertion of freedom against time-honoured codes? Is it that all that they can offer is escapism from present-day problems? Should we, for instance, simply pull the covers over our heads and escape into chromium-plated dreams?

NO. Let us therefore, probe deeper. Whenever modern writers have advocated freedom of will, they have not simply commended a violation of all social and moral traditions and values, as is generally believed. They have only crusaded

against bigoted codes, against suppression of instincts in the name of false morality. Though fighting for freedom of action, these writers have always shown that man can achieve no happiness by transgressing moral limits. In this study I argue through a composite assessment of the works of Edith Wharton, Theodore Dreiser and William Faulkner, that these writers had implicit faith in the freedom of man to shape his destiny through his own moral choice. At the same time they also believed that a wrong moral choice led to lifelong guilt and expiation.

The theme is particularly relevant to American society at the beginning of the twentieth century because in the period between the two World Wars, and especially after the Civil War, the agrarian and aristocratic way of life seemed to have passed away. The virtues the settlers had brought from Europe seemed to lie in the relics of a romantic past. The United States suffered the most drastic changes in its lifestyle and thought because it led the industrial revolution as also the era of scientific advancement. The machine, ruthless and inhuman, had displaced the mountains and ivy-covered ruins upon which a poet could repose his ideas of beauty and moral order. The crystalline tranquillity of Walden ponds was destroyed, and idealism, both social and moral, was in decay. Leaves of grass had been replaced by concrete cement. Man was being pushed out of the center of the moral world and his will was being taken from him by such theories as that of natural selection, economic determinism, or subconscious motivation. Progress in economic prosperity, mechanized superiority,

widespread education, and thermonuclear and astronautical success led to a general feeling of restlessness. To escape being a mere "clog in a machine," man began to assert his identity. Such an assertion often led to a blatant revolt against tradition and established convention.

One's aim in life now became simply asserting one's freedom of action, doing only what one's instinct prompted one to do. Goodness became only a euphemism for what was pleasurable: "Be happy - that's the nearest we can ever come to knowing what's good,"<sup>1</sup> became the *siné qua non* of American consciousness. But the chaos, the discontentment remained. Despite perfect freedom from moral restraints, man did not achieve anticipated fulfillment or happiness. In the very heart of revolt lay the feeling of "guilt", the yearning to conform. Freedom did not, rather could not, guarantee happiness. To be able to say, "I am free" is to defy one's past and to create one's future. Man can do these, and knows he can, but in the bargain he desires happiness as the supreme and ultimate goal of his life. Even total hedonists or the followers of Utilitarianism concede this. To quote John Stuart Mill,

" . . . actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness . . ."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Eugene O. Neill, Strange Interlude, in Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neill (New York: The modern Library, 1959), p. 546.

<sup>2</sup>J.S. Mill, Utilitarianism (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1948), Chapter 2.

To be able to say "I am free" is to accept responsibility for one's actions. It means that despite frustrations, despite childhood experiences, despite anxiety, and libidinous drives, man can "choose" what he will do. His choice is made in the light of his knowledge of the past and his hope for the future. Without this choice, one is neither sinner nor saint but an inanimate object tossed about by the forces that exist both within and without. However, man's freedom of action is delimited by his ties with other people, by his position in society, by basic consideration for the desires and sanctity of others and by his own respect for what is right; in short, by his moral obligations.

Demands of freedom, besides, are irresponsible and chaotic. Morality teaches responsibility and order. Sartre's Orestes can acclaim "Je suis libre" (I am free) only because he is alone. He has no ties, no community, no home. He has no fear either of God or of man - either of his past or of his future. He is bound by no obligations, moral laws or even God's commands. This type of a free man is not a man at all, for man is what he is because of the ability he has: to choose his future in a world that binds him to God and to his fellow men, and above all, because he can choose to envision and create a better world. Therefore, what Sartre lauds as freedom is no freedom at all. It can lead only to madness or death. Caligula too is free to obtain what he desires. He wants the moon and his courtier's wife. He can have the latter but not the former. Such freedom only denotes insanity. Caligula is free, yet alone and mad!

Nietzsche's Superman is free because his "God is dead" and he is "beyond good and evil." The "Blonde Beast" is no longer man because he has become less than man. He is just a power-mad person, not human at all. Similar is the case with Ahab and Raskolnikov. Both believe in absolute freedom of action but in the end lose everything they have, including their own humanity. Morals are not the instruments of the weak to subdue the strong but an expression of human nature to which both the strong and the weak owe their human-ness. To be beyond good and evil is not to become a superman but to become divine or Satanic. But man can choose either to sin or to overcome temptation. As Professor Katsoff says, "The ability to make moral decisions is the truest sign of the mature person. The ability to act in accordance with those decisions is the most significant index of the free person. The ability to struggle against temptation is the sign of the truly human being."<sup>3</sup>

It is this "struggle against temptation" which I find to be most curious as well as fascinating. Even Biblical humans were not alien to it. It has existed since the beginning of creation. Living in a world without sin, having no real moral decisions to make, Adam and Eve were unreal human beings. When the serpent tempts Eve, he gives her reasons for choosing to do what is forbidden. Even then Eve chooses to eat the apple. She makes her own moral decision, and by doing so

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<sup>3</sup>L.O. Katsoff, Making Moral Decisions (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965), p. 277.

she becomes the first woman-human. Until Eve knew good and evil, she could not be human, and not being human, could not die. As for Adam, we are told he ate, being given the fruit by Eve, whereupon he knew good from evil and was subject to death, because knowledge of good and evil would lead to future choices of evil and "the wages of sin is death." Human story thus began with the first moral choice. From then on men have struggled to do good. They are indeed human, all too human, for they find the doing of good terribly arduous, and the pitiful struggle compels consideration, deliberation, evaluation as well as the realization that moral values are of great importance. It also implies a conscious election of fate through opting for a moral course of action often involving the fate of others.

Moral choice, therefore, is "any ethical action between two alternatives which involves the active participation of reason and free exercise of will."<sup>4</sup> The necessary conditions are as follows: (a) there is an actor, (b) true alternatives are present, (c) there is involvement of moral principles, (d) there are motives for achieving an end, (e) there is definite consciousness of an act being moral or contrary, (f) there is no compulsion but free exercise of will, and (g) a definite decision in favour of an alternative. According to A.K. Stout, "Free moral choice involves not the fear

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<sup>4</sup>Aristotle, Poetics, trans. S.H. Butcher (Ludhiana: Kalyani Publishers, 1974), Chapter 4.

Note: All emphasis in quotations throughout the text is mine.

of punishment but the knowledge and recognition of the wrongness of the act and how it will be viewed by the community of which he (the actor) is a member."<sup>5</sup> It is when an individual's own desires are at variance with the rights and expectations of others that a moral conflict arises. It is then that man is faced with a choice - to affirm the will of self or that of society.

Down through the ages this conflict has been portrayed in theological treatises, in pamphlets, in newspapers and, above all, in our great works of literature. It has engaged the attention of serious artists from the days of the ancient Morality plays and Greek tragedies to the latest fiction. Aristotle considered moral struggle to be the very soul of drama, "Real tragedy has a certain kind of hero, of certain moral and social stature, with a certain degree of possibility of free choice, or at least the appearance and illusion of free choice. He must justify his fate so that we witness something more than passivity and realize that all suffering has some show of rationality."<sup>6</sup>

Aristotle awarded the palm for classic tragedy to Oedipus Tyrannus of Sophocles. Though the "oracle has spoken" for Oedipus, he becomes tragic because he strives against the prediction. Mere passive acceptance of predestination would

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<sup>5</sup>A.K. Stout, "Moral Freedom Guilt and Responsibility," Readings in Ethical Theory, ed.W.Sellars & Hospers (New York: Appleton Century Crofts Inc., 1970), p. 546.

<sup>6</sup>Aristotle, Poetics, Refer Chapter 15.



have lessened considerably the majesty and acclaim attained by the play. It is in the interweaving of guilt and innocence, in the willing of his own actions against the pressure of destiny, in the persistent insistence on knowing who he is and in the crushing ruin that this knowledge brings him to, that the tragic glory of Oedipus lies. Similarly a Faust could be tempted to sell his very soul for the lure of knowledge. The classic tragic protagonist such as Oedipus, Faustus, Othello or Hamlet yearns towards self-realization or self-fulfillment and in the process destroys himself. The modern tragic protagonist such as a Raskolnikov, an Ahab, a Lord Jim, a Joseph K., a Clyde Griffiths or a Joe Christmas must use all his intelligence, strength and luck mainly to traverse the tightrope between Cosmic Chaos on one hand and Cosmic Absurdity on the other. To him life has meaning only when he can try it on the test of his own pulses. In the face of the theories of self-exculpation formulated by present-day psychology and sociology, which presumably give the individual the right to scream, "It's not my fault! It's not my fault!", his preference is much nearer the dreadful freedom of the Existentialist: he is totally, tragically, free and totally accountable for his actions. As a result, to assert his freedom, man often challenges all conventional moral precepts claiming it to be a search for individual integrity and individual limits.

The history of American fiction is hardly two or three centuries old, and predictably enough, man's choice of action and freedom of will has engaged the attention of many committed writers from Jonathan Edwards and Emerson to

Henry James and Faulkner. According to Edwards,

Moral virtue cannot exist without the mind and its power of choosing or deciding...Man ought to act according to principles of perfect justice and benevolence, this is his moral responsibility. But he is unable to accomplish this on his own; this is his moral weakness. <sup>7</sup>

It is neither necessary nor possible to make a comprehensive survey of all the writers of the nineteenth century, but to take two classic examples, Hawthorne seemed much pre-occupied with moral conflicts in colonial New England. However, he also discerned the seed of decadence in the Puritan New England morality and devoted most of his shorter fiction to exploring the repressions of the Puritan mind. However, his declaration of man's need for freedom to act was rather feeble, and outraged by his own courage, he set forth at length to show how the choice of instinct over the dictates of Divine Will (Church) leads to lifelong guilt and tragic expiation (The Scarlet Letter, Blithedale Romance etc.). Though Hawthorne's voice was but a mild assertion and his technique more of allegory and symbolism than open defiance of convention, yet his concern with the moral dilemma of man was obsessive and profound—"The kingdom of God is within you, but also the kingdom of the Devil, evil as well as good." When a man's aspirations develop beyond his moral nature, i.e., when personal desire triumphs "over the sense of brotherhood with man and reverence for God," when a woman "seeks to place

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<sup>7</sup>Guy N. Stroh, "Jonathan Edwards: Puritanism and Determination," American Philosophy from Edwards to Dewey (New Delhi: Affiliated East-West Press Pvt. Ltd., 1970), pp. 20, 22.

herself above the sympathies of our common nature," then doom is inevitable. As Barriss Mills neatly sums up, "Not in the mind, not in the intellect, nor in the fruits of the intellect, for the mind deals largely with externals, but deep in the heart lie all of good and evil, all that was of real importance for Hawthorne."<sup>8</sup>

In Melville, the issue is much more pronounced and complex. His most controversial character Ahab makes this same moral choice between himself and God, between the interests of the "self" and those of the community. It is in his tragic though glorious death that we discover the truth, "It is in disobeying ourselves that the hardness of obeying God consists." (Father Mapple's first sermon). Professor Friedman believes moral choice to be an important and recurrent theme in Melville's works—in Moby Dick it is in the mind of Ahab; in Pierre it lies in grappling with the ambiguities of good and evil, between the "chronometrical standards" of ideal Christian conduct and the "horological standards" of contemporary society. In Clarel the choice is between religious doctrines of the Anglican versus the Catholic Church on the one hand and natural, honest virtues on the other. Billy Budd explores through the character of Captain Vere, the choice between "military duty" and "moral scruple." In the words of Friedman, "Melville's belief is that any moral choice is

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<sup>8</sup>Barriss Mills, "Hawthorne and Puritanism," New England Quarterly, 21 (1948), 90.

better than no-choice at all."<sup>9</sup> (This is depicted subtly in Bartleby where lack of any preference leads Bartleby to become a mere "fixture" in his employer's office, sans any human feelings, sympathies or aspirations).

Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mark Twain and Henry James are other literary titans who seemed concerned with the freedom of man, the first two in the physical and political sense primarily and the last in the moral sense. As Edward Wagenknecht, the eminent literary historian, says,

Henry James knew that freedom of will could not be demonstrated but he held that, even were it an illusion, we must cling to it, if for no other reason than because the moral life (and the art of fiction) can only exist upon this postulate.<sup>10</sup>

The bohemianism of Cabell and Bierce and the Utopian socialists of the 1880s and 1890s created a mild flutter but for the most part American literature retained a smug complacency, based on an ideal of total moral conformity to norms. It was then that Zola's naturalism blazed its way through the American imagination, wild, flamboyant and extravagant. Like a dazzling, powerful and destructive conflagration, it consumed the materials that nourished imagination. As a liberating force it began with a great explosion, a blowing to smithereens of the compact, old, ethical, orthodox order. Writers like Crane, Norris, Garland, Anderson and others abandoned the

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<sup>9</sup>M. Friedman, Problematic Rebel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 96.

<sup>10</sup>Edward Wagenknecht, Cavalcade of the American Novel (Calcutta: Oxford and IBH Publishing Co., 1969), p.162.

tradition of Emerson's noble idealism and Howells' Victorian morality and embraced the "natural" and the "real" with a fetishistic vigour. Wharton, Glasgow and Cather were among the few novelists of the era who became seriously aware of the deep changes that were taking place in American consciousness and sought to meet them by recovering lost personal values. They realized that in a world driven by acquisition and hypocrisy, man's enduring values of courage, honesty and integrity alone offer any measure of contentment. In fact, I believe Edith Wharton to be the first of the American novelists to detect the note of despair in revolutionary ethical standards of behaviour and of literature. Considered a fragile flower of American aristocracy, too *au fait* in *distingue* society to be taken seriously, and too much influenced by French attitudes and fashions to project serious concerns in her work, Edith Wharton's work has been much underestimated. In her own words, "I was a failure in Boston because they thought I was too fashionable to be intelligent, and a failure in New York because they were afraid I was too intelligent to be fashionable."<sup>11</sup> It is with a sensitive and rare understanding that she depicts the moral struggle of a Lily Bart, an Ethan Frome and a Newland Archer, while at the same time raising the revolutionary issue of euthanasia as a moral precept in The Fruit of the Tree. The deliberation, prevarication, and

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<sup>11</sup>Edith Wharton, quoted by Edward Wagenknecht, *Ibid.*, p. 252.

confusion of her characters before they make a moral choice offer interesting study. The consequences of their choices prove that freedom, though admirable as a concept, can bring tragic results if followed to an extreme where considerations of moral duty, obligation and commitment become subordinate. A frank depiction of man's conflict between instinct and convention makes Edith Wharton a pioneer of American realism. It is in her works that for the first time in that era man is presented as a living, feeling, thinking individual, and not as a mere puppet in the hands of forces beyond his control. Edith Wharton, as I propose to show, clearly believes in man's creation of his own future as also in the fact that any happiness dependent on social disapproval and on moral transgression cannot be permanent.

Numerous in-depth studies have tried to show Edith Wharton as a Puritan while some have presented her as a Puritanic rebel, who, while she clamours for social and moral freedom, is yet a hardbound conformist. Louis Auchincloss, Nine American Novelists; E.K. Brown, Edith Wharton: Etude Critique; Wilbur Cross, Edith Wharton: A Critical Study; Frederick Hoffman, Points of Moral Reference; Lionel Trilling, Great Moral Dilemmas; Wagenknecht, Cavalcade of the American Novel; are some distinguished critics who have studied the ethical aspect in Wharton's works. However, Blake Nevius's full-length study, Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction and Marilyn Lyde's Edith Wharton: Convention and Morality in the Work of a Novelist deserve special mention as being illuminating studies of her moral philosophy. Cynthia Griffin Wolff's

penetrating psychological studies especially A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton and R.W.B. Lewis's biography Edith Wharton are also invaluable sources of information on Wharton's thoughts and philosophy. Wade Tyree of Princeton University has written a dissertation (unpublished) on the Puritan aspects of Edith Wharton entitled Puritan in the Drawing-Room (1979) which deals with her ethical concerns. Ammons' valuable book Edith Wharton's Argument with America portrays Wharton not only as a superb creator of fiction but also as "a clear and brilliant voice challenging Progressive America's naive optimism about the degree and quality of change taking place in women's lives in the early part of the twentieth century." However, my concern in the present dissertation is only with Edith Wharton's brilliant portrayal of moral choice made by her characters and the consequences which such a choice entails. In the process I will also attempt a brief interpretation of what I consider to be Wharton's philosophy regarding man's moral freedom and limitations, an aspect which I feel has not been dealt with by previous critics.

In a period when Americans seemed either to be gloriously optimistic or sensationally disenchanted, Dreiser blazed a trail of hope as well as despair, when he presented the Americans with a perfect portrayal of their world in all its vast, irregular complexity. In America as well as anywhere in human society might be studied the will to act. Americans no more than other men and women have counted in advance the profit or loss of what they were to do. In the words of

from observing fear or pain in others. Hence he chooses to inflict fear and pain. He later kills Tommy because of the latter's fumbling attempts to protect Temple, and also in jealousy of Tommy's simple enjoyment of the whiskey that would kill himself. Red is killed when he and Temple begin to lose fear of Popeye, and enjoy themselves despite his presence. Needless to say, all his actions display total irreverence for the sanctity of others, for moral values and for life itself.

Popeye is ironically arrested on his way to visit his mother — the one bond of affection he has enjoyed and the only thread which binds him to life. He is convicted and prosecuted not for the killing of Tommy or Red but for the murder of a man he had never even seen in a town where he had never been. He finds the situation grimly appropriate in a world he hates and chooses death out of sheer boredom. He refuses to have a defence case built up for he realizes that quite literally he has never lived, having never experienced the essential emotions of life — love, compassion, brotherhood, sorrow, achievement or loss. All that he has ever known has been a yawning, emotional vacuum — stretching as a never-ending abyss before him. Choosing death now as a final assertion that Life exists, it matters little to Popeye whether he is hanged for killing Tommy, Red or an unknown man. It is after all the last joke that he can play on life and therefore Popeye makes no effort to counter this final gambit. We see him sitting alone in jail and wonder what is going through his mind. Perhaps his mind is not even capable of



Burton Rascoe, "the three passions governing the American mind were the passion for things, the passion for personal grandeur and the passion for power."<sup>12</sup> While interpreting these with perfect understanding, Dreiser also discovered that there were other passions which drove his people, when overlooking all considerations of family, duty or society, betrayed by illusive goals, they stood hesitant between good and evil. This dramatic instant is what I wish to highlight in Dreiser's works.

Dreiser had seen too much of the seamy side of life to accept conventional American standards of fiction. After considerable introspection and "reportorial looking in at windows of several cities," he concluded that the real world was one of poverty and prostitution. It was composed of money-hungry, sex-hungry males and females who, so far as the "heat of their blood" demanded, seized what they wanted through force or compulsion. These desires he called "chemic compulsions," which often led man to disregard moral obligations. He was the first writer of his age to evoke serious attention by challenging the Victorian ideals of refinement and gentility, since he believed them to distort the truth about human nature. Those who controlled critical opinion at that time rushed at Dreiser crying "Liar" and "Corrupter of Youth." They felt that he knew no more or no less than his crudely generalized mechanism of man - the theory that

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<sup>12</sup>Burton Rascoe, Theodore Dreiser (New York: Robert M. McBride, 1925), p. 5.

man is an animal, subject to no human law but only the law of his own instinct, controlled only by natural forces. Critics like Stuart Sherman, The Main Stream; Henry Commager, The American Mind; Robert Elias, Theodore Dreiser: Apostle of Nature; Robert Spiller, The Cycle of American Literature; further propagated the view by subscribing to them. Spiller clearly stated that Dreiser "had built his story on a morality of omnipotent natural law, on a faith in instinct that transcended man-made values" and that "when the very structure of society was challenged, there was cause for alarm. It was Dreiser himself and not merely Carrie who espoused an anarchic ethic."<sup>13</sup> Following this line of thought, people came to regard Dreiser as a hard-core naturalist, the precursor of the Sexual Revolution in America and a fanatic practitioner of hedonism. Consequently, it came to be generally believed that Dreiser dealt only with sex, that his style was crude, graceless and heavy and that his philosophy was puerile. It was only in the late fifties and early sixties that a moralistic and humanistic dimension to his philosophy was discovered by critics like Maxwell Geismar, "Dreiser and the Dark Texture of Life" in Rebels and Ancestors and American Moderns: From Rebellion to Conformity. Geismar took a sympathetic stand for Dreiser and explained, "what has been called the Sexual Revolution in our native letters was actually the freedom to discuss human character and human relationships in

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<sup>13</sup> Robert Spiller, The Cycle of American Literature (New York: Macmillan Co., 1956), p. 173.

society, man himself must choose. For only by sharing Horace's dream, while recognizing it as a dream, can society re-examine its conduct and make it once more a living expression of man's aspirations — a sanctuary from all distress and suffering.

Requiem for A Nun (1951) recapitulates and extends the theme of Sanctuary by presenting history as a record of man's furious attempts to establish a collective identity, to delegate his moral responsibility, and to find security within a system of laws. As Gavin Stevens says in the book, "the past is never dead. It's not even past."<sup>18</sup> Nothing done in the past is totally finished or forgotten. Each moral decision initiates a sequence of cause and effect which weaves a pattern of retribution. Each man thus helps to mould the fate that finally overtakes him. The interrelation of past, present and future is rendered by the very structure of the book.

In the historical process delineated in the interchapters, the ideal of justice as man's inner moral force has been blurred to such an extent that ethics are reduced to a legalistic formula. The building of Jefferson courthouse had been undertaken by individuals to relieve themselves of the responsibility for the loss of the lock (symbolic of trust). Built in order to evade a law and the fear of punishment, the courthouse becomes a battleground where justice can be

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<sup>18</sup>William Faulkner, Requiem for A Nun (New York: Random House, 1951), p. 92. Subsequent references to the book are cited in the text.

terms of those primary needs and drives which actually do determine our success or failure in life, which create our happiness and our follies."<sup>14</sup> Wayne Morgan, "Theodore Dreiser: The Naturalist as Humanist" in American Writers in Rebellion,

Dustin Heuston, "Theodore Dreiser: Naturalist or Theist,"<sup>15</sup> William L. Vance, "Dreiserian Tragedy"<sup>16</sup> and Mordecai Marcus<sup>17</sup> are some of the critics who have shown a sensitive understanding of Dreiser's tragic vision and of his basic concern with man's commitment to values, both moral and social. A brilliant study of this aspect was made recently by Professor R.N. Mookherjee in his book, Theodore Dreiser: His Thought and Social Criticism. Chapter II of the book, "The Divided Soul: Naturalism, Spiritualism and Humanitarianism" characterizes Dreiser's deep concern for moral values in an individual's life. A recent study, "Dreiser's Defence of the Self: A Reading of Sister Carrie and An American Tragedy" was conducted by Paul Avrum of the University of Toronto in 1979. Avrum asserts that far from denying man's individuality against cosmic forces, Dreiser's work reflects an "impassioned

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<sup>14</sup>Maxwell Geismar, American Moderns: From Rebellion to Conformity (New York: Hill and Wang, 1958), p. 23.

<sup>15</sup>Dustin Heuston, "Theodore Dreiser, Naturalist or Theist?" Brigham Young University Studies, 3 (Winter 1961), 41-9.

<sup>16</sup>William L. Vance, "Dreiserian Tragedy," Studies in the Novel (Spring 1972), 39-51.

<sup>17</sup>Mordecai Marcus, "Loneliness, Death, And Fulfillment in 'Jennie Gerhardt,'" Studies in American Fiction (Spring 1979),

moral. In the beginning was the divine concept of cosmic continuity, acknowledging man's fundamental right to freedom (illustrated by the prose inter-chapters). In the end, the divine concept depends on the individual's acceptance of God's contract with man concerning free individual capacities and moral choices. Man, through mistaken choice, suffers, is forgiven, granted salvation and embraced in the cosmic continuity (as evidenced in the dramatic portions). In the end, what remains is the all-embracing divine continuity encompassing human fallibility, suffering, penitence, mercy, regeneration and nirvana.

Maxwell Geismar, while observing the moral crisis prevalent in modern American writers remarked, "There is no catharsis for the Faulknerian sense of evil. With Faulkner, there is no pattern of such guilt and expiation, as with our own Nordic Dostoevsky or a Hemingway: no crushed tenderness here, no redemption through suffering or through any other chalice of grace. There is indeed no redemption . . . . Painting his people in gruesome colours, seeing humanity only in terms of its aberrations, Faulkner has come with Light in August to show us the full range of his discontent."<sup>22</sup> Our study of Sanctuary and Requiem for a Nun has shown us beyond doubt that though overtly Faulkner is neither a Dostoevsky nor a Hemingway, man's guilt and expiation is a vital issue with him. Faulkner passes no comments on the actions or

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<sup>22</sup> Maxwell Geismar, Writers in Crisis: The American Novel 1925-1940 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1963), pp. 167-168.

bear anything. He can even bear what he never done."

This is evident through his magnanimity in offering love and marriage to Lena and a name and security to her child. All he asks of life is mercy and the strength to persevere. As we see him on the journey of life with Lena and the child, we can be sure that Byron will "endure and prevail" on the basis of his inherent goodness. There is not merely the "discontent" of Faulkner evident in the book; there is definitely a positive affirmation of the possibilities of life, as when Byron is seen "travelling the road recommended by the saints."<sup>24</sup>

Lena Grove is another of Faulkner's primitive and pastoral characters, a social outcast who has made herself vulnerable to social criticism because she has violated certain moral conventions. She, however, has a firm faith in the Lord, "she told Martha last night about how the Lord will see that what is right will get done" (p. 22). She suffers long for her moral transgression, but is redeemed through her unswerving belief in the Almighty, and through passive acceptance of the atonement she has to undergo. This retribution takes the form of social ostracism, uncertainty and fear of the future. She "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things," and thus wins back earthly security and promise of heavenly salvation. Her qualities of gentleness, kindness, compassion, faith, hope and love

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<sup>24</sup>H.H. Waggoner, William Faulkner: From Jefferson to the World, p. 110.

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concern about the erosion of personal identity in a modern mechanized, materialistic society."<sup>18</sup>

However, Dreiser's concern regarding morals has usually been found to be as inconsistent as it was challenging. But this should not be taken to mean that Dreiser was a "confused philosopher," an "inconsistent mechanist," or a "barbaric naturalist," as critics have labelled him. We must understand that his world was a world of growing cities, new fortunes, new hopes and new ideals. Dreiser's essential concern was how to find some ideas, values, aims and purposes which might give more dignity and happiness to those who were a part of his changing world. My concern in this study is with the portrayal and reflection of man's inner struggle as one of the chief motifs of Dreiser's fiction. The dictates of conventional society tend to force man to repress his nature; the need to express and to satisfy his nature pushes him toward violating social codes. Life as a search for beauty, a quest for power, an effort to obtain fulfillment becomes one long struggle. It is this struggle in all its magnificence, in all its dramatic potential, which I wish to study in Dreiser. Interestingly, the theme of moral choice with its consequences, leads to a new view of Dreiser's philosophy. Concerned only superficially with the new conceptions of the Universe obtained from science and from the Naturalist movement in Europe,

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<sup>18</sup>Paul Avrum, "Dreiser's Defence of the Self: A Reading of 'Sister Carrie' and 'An American Tragedy,'" Dissertation Abstracts, 40 (1979), 859A. (Toronto).

Dreiser at heart is a brilliant painter of man's moral condition. His sympathy for human desires and drives and his absolute faith in the inherent ability of man to override evil impulses make him an ideal subject for the present study. Another reason I have for choosing Dreiser as one of my subjects, is that he reveals the very nerves of American society and has faith in the basic goodness of human nature. Because of these attributes, Dreiser has exerted a more profound and lasting influence than most novelists of twentieth-century realistic fiction in America.

The World Wars as well as the stock market collapsed in 1929 and the subsequent years of depression and social reconstruction brought about major changes in the temper of American life. As the Republic had once reached its literary fulfillment in the movement in which Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman were the leading spokesmen, so the Continental Nation now had found its mature expression in a dozen or more major writers from Dreiser and Frost to Eliot and Faulkner. At a time when most writers were spinning romantic yarns and ladling out sweetness, love and music, these writers powerfully projected man's inherent viciousness, corruption and violence.

In the scope of his scene and dimensions of his portraiture, in the complexity and subtlety of his emotions as well as in his rhetorical and complex prose style, Faulkner is perhaps, as Gide remarked, "the most important of the stars in this new constellation." Faulkner has been accepted as a great American writer, though occasional cries of dissent have risen from critics who feel he is obscure, difficult and



and impending disaster. He feels the dominant symbols to be blood, wind and the wild palms.<sup>31</sup> Refusing her last request to flee, Harry remains with her during the last moments of their love; when the ambulance and sheriff arrive, he asks to be handcuffed. He is sentenced to fifty years of hard labour at a prison farm. His rejection of a chance of suicide presented by Charlotte's husband serves as a final affirmation of his wish to enjoy the full pain of punishment — to take grief in its most grievous form.

Harry's anguish throbs in the lines of the book. Death becomes palpable, choking off breath. The palm outside the jail shaking without any wind becomes a symbol of the wild, short love Harry shared with Charlotte. The black sea waters suggest his sense of boundless desolation after her death. All that remains alive is memory of death.

Such love, as the tragedy of Harry and Charlotte proves, ends disastrously because it is grounded in illusion. It violates society, nature, life. It asks of life more than it can give and is ultimately self-destructive. It thrives on emotionalism and reality destroys its essence. Whenever the environment begins to intrude, Harry and Charlotte find themselves developing conflicting interests and start looking for a new place to resuscitate their dying love. But Utah, Texas, Mississippi, Wisconsin or any other place is merely another version of Chicago. They are totally uncertain.

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<sup>31</sup> Melvin Backman, Faulkner: The Major Years (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), p. 135.

unenjoyable. As O'Connor amusedly remarks, "The admirers of Faulkner sometimes claim that his detractors disparage him because they fail to understand the nature of his genius, and his detractors sometimes say that Faulkner's admirers are bemused by his rhetoric."<sup>19</sup> The truth lies, perhaps, in between. I find Faulkner to be particularly important for my study because he has consistently recognized the dark, subconscious scars and fears that drive his people. Indeed, almost no important character in Faulkner's novels, from Temple, Joe Christmas, Sutpen, Hightower to Harry Wilbourne, is without his terrible struggles and agonies of spirit. Yet these characters are all treated sympathetically by the creator. Faulkner's characters are no puppets driven by psychic malignancies or naturalistic forces, but are normal human beings. Faulkner does not condescend or patronize them, nor does he intend to parade them as cases. He shows them as being driven to doom by their own drives and lusts, and, above all, by their own free choice.

In his Stockholm Address on receiving the Nobel Prize in 1950, Faulkner said that the writer's duty is to "write about man's soul and spirit, capable of compassion, sacrifice and endurance." Hence the ethical and spiritual overtones of his works have never been overlooked by critics. An excellent compilation of essays, some of them dealing with the moral aspect in Faulkner, was edited by Hoffman and Vickery, William

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<sup>19</sup>William Van O'Connor, "William Faulkner" Seven Modern American Novelists, ed. O'Connor (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1968), p. 123.

existence."<sup>2</sup> Freedom to choose one's values in life, freedom to act according to one's intrinsic moral code, is Faulkner's kind of freedom. It is both man's boon and his bane. Though Faulkner too believes that "Man is condemned to be free," yet his view of man's freedom is less akin to Sartre than it is to Rousseau, for, though born free, man is unfortunately "yet found everywhere in chains." Freedom to throw off the shackles of fanatical belief and moribund codes and to recognize and sift the good and bad impulses in our hearts is the freedom which Faulkner advocates.

Professor Kattsoff says that when we attempt to evaluate a person's character or to discover his true intentions, we always point to the consequences of his action. Since determining the exact nature of a person's intentions is not always possible and an arbitrary determination is often inaccurate, the consequences of his acts become the primary source of determining our evaluation of his character, his motives and his ends.<sup>3</sup> All three writers intend us to judge the motives of their characters through the moral choices made by them. In the process, they convey their own sense of right and wrong — Wharton subtly through the denouement of her stories; Dreiser overtly through personal comments and often didactic discourses which make categorisation of his stories into body and conclusion or crime and consequences imperative; Faulkner

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<sup>2</sup>William Faulkner, Requiem for A Nun, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup>Louis O. Kattsoff, Making Moral Decisions, p. 167.

destruction of God in the manner of Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov, Melville's Ahab, Nietzsche's Superman or Sartre's Orestes. Freewill and choice of action is necessary, but it should find its meaning and significance in the relationship with God and with other human beings. If the choice lies between affirming oneself and affirming God, then, realising that the self is essentially evil and that obedience to God inevitably entails disregard of the demands of the self, opting for God and good is the highest morality known to man. It is also his safest bet for happiness in a world beset by sin and suffering. As the infallible Bible says, "Woe to him who would not be true even though to be false were salvation."

These writers thus have implicit faith in man's ability to transcend the external and internal temptations of life and to disregard the social allurements of money, status and luxury so as to be able to create a happier tomorrow. They have the utmost trust in man's ability to "rediscover his roots," to "endure and prevail." It is this ability which grants man the unerring use of Reason, Love, Truth and Goodness as lodestars which may enable him to recreate, the "old New York" which Wharton reminisces about and the "Paradise on Earth" which Faulkner foresees. In the words of Dreiser,

And so from the heart comes the answer  
of him who does and serves  
That by degrees,  
A new and better world  
May be made.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Dreiser, "What to Do?" Free World, 9 (March 1945), 10.

Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism which was later updated and amended. Maxwell Geismar's, Writers in Crisis, Olga Vickery's, The Novels of William Faulkner, Joseph Gold's, William Faulkner: A Study in Humanism from Metaphor to Discourse, Melvin Backman's, Faulkner: The Major Years, H.H. Waggoner's, William Faulkner: From Jefferson to the World, Cleanth Brooks' Toward Yoknapatawpha and Beyond are some invaluable full-length studies of Faulkner's moral philosophy as evidenced in his works.

Among the numerous articles on this aspect are those by C.R. Anderson, "Faulkner's Moral Center,"<sup>20</sup> Alfred Kazin, "Faulkner's Vision of Human Integrity,"<sup>21</sup> William Brown, "Faulkner's Paradox in Pathology and Salvation,"<sup>22</sup> H.E. Spivey, "Faulkner and the Adamic Myth."<sup>23</sup> Constraints of time and space do not permit me to list all the illuminating studies made on Faulkner's moral theme in various works. In the present study, I wish to isolate the theme of moral choice in Faulkner's works and to show by interpretation and illustration that his characters are not determinists or existentialists lost in the meaningless scheme of the universe. They are free, struggling human beings who make or mar their own

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<sup>20</sup>C.R. Anderson, "Faulkner's Moral Center," Etudes Anglaises, 7 (Jan. 1954), 48-58.

<sup>21</sup>Alfred Kazin, "Faulkner's Vision of Human Integrity," Harvard Advocate, 135 (Nov. 1951), 28-33.

<sup>22</sup>William R. Brown, "Faulkner's Paradox in Pathology and Salvation: 'Sanctuary,' 'Light in August' and 'Requiem for A Nun,'" TSL, 9 (August 1967), 429-49.

destinies. Faulkner's cumbersome rhetoric only increases the challenge to explore the many dimensions of his characters. I particularly choose the less-important works of Faulkner because there is little need to reiterate the moral import of well-known works like Absalom! Absalom!, The Fable and The Sound and the Fury. It is my purpose to show that Faulkner was always morally conscious of his commitment as a writer of modern tragedy and that even his apparently lesser-known works, the "offensive" Sanctuary, the "insignificant" Requiem for A Nun, and the "inconsequential" Wild Palms, reflect Faulkner's belief in the freedom of man, who by his own free choice, brings upon himself doom or happiness, immortality or death. As Faulkner himself said, ". . . the young man or woman writing today has forgotten the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself, which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat."<sup>24</sup>

Thus, a Sanctuary as much as a Light in August can make "good writing" of permanent value, since both concern themselves with "the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself," i.e., the conflict between the warring good and evil impulses in our hearts. The choice, according to Faulkner, is free, and is its own reward or punishment, for, "Man is responsible to Man, not God."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>William Faulkner, Stockholm Address, 1950.

<sup>25</sup>William Faulkner, A Fable (New York: Random House, 1954), p. 180.

This study is an attempt, through an analysis and interpretation of selected works of Wharton, Dreiser and Faulkner, to show how in an age of emotional despair and confused values, these writers have tried to project and uphold the essential goodness in man. With due emphasis on the complex struggle between the conflicting instincts in man and on the pull between desire on the one hand and responsibility on the other, these writers portray the personal disintegration which follows a wrong moral choice. Hence the need for a careful, correct course of action is imperative for achieving happiness in a world beset by trauma and travail. It is hoped that by examining closely the treatment of their plots, the mental development of their characters, and their imagery and symbolism, I shall be able to discover the underlying ethical bases of these so-called "moral rebels" or "naturalists." I thus hope to be able to offer a new interpretation of their works which will lead to a modified and enlarged understanding of their vision of life and of the human condition.

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## THE TREMULOUS WING

A nineteenth-century drawing-room. Ornately furnished with exclusive tapestry and matching upholstered sofas. Walls, above their wainscoting of highly varnished mahogany, hung with damask and boasting of original Rembrandts and da Vincis. Glass boules privileged with exclusive objets d'art, discriminatingly imported from Europe. In the centre, on a white fur rug, a table of Mexican onyx on which is prominently placed a slender vase with "only two Jacqueminot roses (of which nobody ever bought less than a dozen)." Beside it, lie casually a copy of Darwin's The Origin of Species, and Bourget's Sensations d' Italie. Exquisite in taste and form, the room is eloquently reflective of its owner — aristocratic, elusive, yet rebellious — Edith Wharton.

Conventionally conscious of her New York elite status, Edith Wharton was always at heart an expatriate, a liberal attracted towards the deviant and brutal things of life. Often accused of being nothing more than a pioneer of interior decoration, "unconsciously shut in behind plate glass, where butlers serve formal dinners, and white shoulders go up at the mere suggestion of everyday gingham,"<sup>1</sup> she has been much

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<sup>1</sup>Vernon L. Parrington, "Our Literary Aristocrat," in Irving Howe, ed., Edith Wharton: A Collection of Critical Essays, Twentieth Century Views (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 153. Henceforth referred to as Edith Wharton, TCV.



undervalued. Regarded as one concerning herself only with the "nice moral issues" of the privileged set, having nothing to do with the rise of the masses or the Union demand for a higher wage,<sup>2</sup> she is denied her rightful position as the pioneer of American realism.

At a time when American literature was reeling under the bondage of escapist romances and moral timidity, it was Edith Wharton who first brought live, struggling passion to literature, although she undoubtedly savoured it with a well-bred reticence and chilled restraint. Alfred Kazin rightly believes that perhaps it was ". . . her own alienation and loneliness [that] gave her a sympathy for erratic spirits and illicit emotions that was unique in its time. It has been forgotten how much Edith Wharton contributed to the plain speaking traditions of American realism."<sup>3</sup> Women wrote to her in resentful indignation asking her if she ever knew any respectable women. Some even warned her that no great work of imagination had ever been based on illicit passion. What they failed to perceive was that passion is an intrinsic part of a human being and that it had been brought to letters by a distinguished artist, a conservative woman, who needed to attain by extension of her literary powers the liberation she desired from the stifling monotony of her well-ordered existence. Possessed of unusual resources of mind and spirit,

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<sup>2</sup>Van Wyck Brooks, The Confident Years: 1885-1915 (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1955), pp. 283-300.

<sup>3</sup>Alfred Kazin, "Edith Wharton," TCV, p. 90.

she was expending them in service to her class and her nation. For remarkable service it was, to speak the language of the heart at a time when the best energies in America were devoted either to fervent muckraking or to the complex new world of industrial capitalism. Further, an America complacent in the cribbed and caged world of Howellsian and Hawthornian morality denied Edith Wharton the right to publish anything that might offend "a non-existent clergyman in the Mississippi Valley . . . [I] made up my mind from the first that I would never sacrifice my literary conscience to this ghostly censor." At the same time, Wharton was conscious of the hard times she had "turning the wooden dolls of that literary generation into struggling, suffering, human beings." "But we have been avenged and more than avenged," she declared later, "not only by life but by the novelists and I hope the latter will see before long that it is as hard to get dramatic interest out of a mob of irresponsible criminals as out of the Puritan marionettes who formed our stock-in-trade. Authentic human nature lies somewhere between the two . . . ." <sup>4</sup>

Edith Wharton sincerely believed in the ethical independence of her fictional creations, which made them "authentic" human beings with moral wills of their own, rather than being mere "wooden dolls." Without denying the moral independence of the human soul, she could determine the behaviour of her

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<sup>4</sup>Edith Wharton, quoted in "Introduction" Edith Wharton Omnibus, ed., Gore Vidal (New York: Charles Scribners, 1978), pp. xi-xii.

characters to a considerable extent. This she achieved through creating certain social conditions which led to a clash between desire and duty. The arena of her fiction is therefore the forefront of social life, where manners reveal moral stress or bias, and accepted forms of conduct may break under the weight of personal desire. Her tragic heroes and heroines are passionate or imaginative spirits, who half belong to and half rebel against the society of which they are members. On one hand there is the basic drive for self-fulfillment, on the other is the compelling deeply ingrained sense of duty to the group. In these "crucial moments," the individual is faced with an extremely difficult choice. The motives, the alternatives and the importance of this choice, which Edith Wharton terms "the great problem of the shifting relation between passion (revolt) and duty (convention),"<sup>5</sup> shall be the primary concern in this chapter.

Edith Wharton knew New York society intimately and she also knew it to be a mere veneer of hypocritical concepts. The problem was how to extract from such a subject the "typical human significance" which is the "story-teller's reason for telling one story rather than another . . . ." The answer was that "a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys."<sup>6</sup> This answer was

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<sup>5</sup>Edith Wharton, "George Eliot," Bookman, 15 (May 1902), 250.

<sup>6</sup>Edith Wharton, quoted by R.W.B. Lewis, Edith Wharton: A Biography (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 150.

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obtained in the presentation of the sensitive and vital heroine, Lily Bart. The process through which she is led to slow destruction because of her inability to overcome her social ambitions is the theme of The House of Mirth (1905). Coolidge aptly says, "It had found its author an amateur. It left her a professional."<sup>7</sup> Wharton delicately deals with the theme of choice in this book though with great complexity. It is slowly and subtly developed and reaches full flower in her later novels. In this book, there is ingenuity that wishes to triumph over preordained destiny, but it is portrayed merely as a delaying tactic in the minds of the characters.

In the brilliant character of Lily, Edith Wharton shows a rare combination of moral consciousness and moral inconsistency. Despite her several ethereal qualities, Lily is too much "a stray uprooted growth down the heedless current of the years."<sup>8</sup> She chooses not to choose in the most crucial parts of her life. The very first scene of the novel presages this tragedy. Lily stands irresolutely at the Grand Central Station "in the act of transition between one and another of the country houses which disputed her presence after the close of the Newport season" (p. 1). Between her destination (the palatial Bellomont at Rhinebeck) and Selden's flat (the modest yet artistic house of a lawyer) lies the kind of choice by

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<sup>7</sup>Olivia Coolidge, Edith Wharton (New York: Charles Scribners & Sons, 1964), p. 82.

<sup>8</sup>Edith Wharton, The House of Mirth (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1977), p. 318. All subsequent references to the book shall be incorporated in the text.

which Lily, unwilling to choose at all, will be paralyzed and finally defeated. On the grossest level, it is a choice for Lily between freedom and servitude, between wealth and "dinginess," or between luxury and discontent. The tragic irony of the book lies in Lily's view of what she considers freedom/wealth/luxury. It is indeed a conflict between her superficial calculations and innate inclinations.

Lily, Wharton tells us, has been born and initiated into a social world where her whole being dilates in an atmosphere of luxury — "it was the background she required, the only climate she could breathe in" (pp. 39-40). She realizes that she has been brought up to be merely ornamental and desires a situation in which "the noblest attitude should also be the easiest."

There is, however, in Lily "a vein of sentiment," a moral will. She likes to think of her beauty not only as an embellishment, but also as a "power for good" (p. 5). But this pining after moral significance brings with it no capacity to make choices, draw difficult distinctions, or bear hardship; it is, like much else in her nature, diffuse and indolent. Constrained by the monetary and spiritual impoverishment of her life, Lily cannot "breathe long on the heights, there had been nothing in her training to develop any continuity of moral strength" (p. 422). Consequently, there is no compromise between desire for opulence and a craving for upsurge. She is therefore, reduced to ineffectual vacillations between them. Moreover, she suffers from a sense of self-delusion. She says of Gerty to Selden, "But we're so different, you know; she

likes being good, and I like being happy. And besides, she is free, and I am not. If I were, I daresay I could manage to be happy even in her flat" (p. 7). She equates virtue with happiness and decides almost automatically in favour of the latter. What she does not want to perceive is that happiness is a state in itself, which does not necessarily preclude a moral option. One can be both good and happy. Secondly, when faced with a choice involving either a life of spiritual fulfillment or one of material "contentment," Lily defers her decision by saying that she is not free to choose, knowing full well that this very notion is her crucial choice. Gerty Farish is no more or less free than Lily to choose her future. But while Gerty has the grit to go ahead and accept both poverty and spinsterhood in order to pursue a life of good work and honest labour, Lily falsely believes that she is tied, as it were, to the customs of her social set.

At heart, Lily is not compatible with the social group in which she seeks to establish herself with such fervour. Diana Trilling says ". . . she zigzags disastrously between the most gifted conformity to the behaviour required of a young woman in search of a rich, well-placed husband and sudden impulses which run dangerously counter to the commands of practical reason."<sup>9</sup> These "impulses" derive from a quality in Lily, a refinement of taste, an awakening of the moral sense, which neither her dull, puritanical aunt, Mrs. Peniston, nor

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<sup>9</sup>Diana Trilling, "The House of Mirth' Revisited," Edith Wharton, TCV, p. 108.

her coarse admirer Mr. Rosedale even remotely comprehend. Having an acquired taste for luxury, she is yet repelled by the world of the rich. She is too fine in her perceptions to act ruthlessly enough to achieve her worldly aims, and too much the captive of those aims to be able to live by her perceptions. She is trapped in a seething turmoil — a conflict between a need to lure the dismal millionaire Gryce into marriage, and a desire for refined personal relations, which would mean dropping Gryce for the privilege of walking with Lawrence Selden on a warm Sunday afternoon. In the words of Percy Lubbock, "she pays for her fastidiousness by finding herself abandoned by the vivid crowd; and she pays for the courtship of the crowd, so carefully taught her by nearly all the conditions of her life, by discovering that her independence is only strong enough to destroy and not to remake her."<sup>10</sup>

At home neither in the Trenor mansion nor in Selden's book-lined rooms, Lily is at the mercy of her vacillating spirit, a strange kind of restlessness that is not strong enough to urge rebellion. She yearns to fly past the "black prison house" of her social captivity. Often for her, as when Selden invited her to join the "republic of the spirit," "the horizon expanded, the air grew stronger and the free spirit quivered for flight" (p. 64). The significant words here are "free" and "quivered," which Mrs. Wharton uses with definite

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<sup>10</sup>Percy Lubbock, "The Novels of Edith Wharton," Ibid., p. 49.

deliberation. Contrary to Lyde's<sup>11</sup> and Nevius's<sup>12</sup> interpretations, Wharton though not openly assertive, is yet confident of her heroine's ability to fly beyond the "great guilt cage" of her environment. Her seal — "a grey seal with Beyond! beneath a flying ship" points strikingly to both the romance and the irony of her aspirations. Dissatisfied by the purely decorative mission assigned her by her birth and initiation, she is forever aspiring towards a "beyond." But the word "quiver" shows the lack of confidence required for a divergence from set codes, the moral indecision, and finally the want of a harsh consistency without which rebellion is an ineffectual effort. In a predatory world, to give the least sign of faltering is to invite annihilation, and so, with bated breath, we watch the promising Lily sink to the nadir of her career.

As Martin suggests, her unimpeded descent is symbolized by her brief clings to the houses of decreasing mirth<sup>13</sup>:-

(1) The Trenor's, rich and still having traces of an inherited order; (2) Dorset's, connected to the past only in name, not in principles; (3) the Wellington Bry's on their way up and

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<sup>11</sup>Marilyn J. Lyde, Edith Wharton: Convention and Morality in the Work of a Novelist (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1959), p. 135. Observes Lyde, ". . . Lily had little more freedom of choice than Pavlov's dog; she is the innocent victim of heredity and environment."

<sup>12</sup>Blake Nevius, Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1961), p. 57 — "Lily . . . product of her heredity, environment, and the historical moment . . . [is] the protagonist of any recognised naturalistic novel . . . ."



longing desperately to be accepted; (4) the Gormer's, possessing only wealth, and still in the process of formulating a social credo; (5) Norma Hatch's overheated hotel world, "Oriental [in] indolence and disorder"; (6) the "shabby" apartment of Gerty Farish; (7) Mme. Regina's drab millinery establishment; (8) Nettie Struther's tenement flat; and at last, (9) "the solitude of a hall bedroom in a house where she could come and go unremarked among other workers." She goes in terms of decorative symbolism from the richness of Bellomont to the ugly "peacock-blue parlor" of her final home, a room decorated with dried bunches of pampas grass, and blotchy wallpaper.<sup>14</sup>

Besides being the heart-rending process it is, her apparent social descent is largely a subconscious search for meanings fixed beyond the flux of wealth and social status. Paradoxically, this novel, which Diana Trilling has described as "one of the most telling indictments of the whole of American society, of a whole social system based on the chance distribution of wealth, that has ever been put to paper,"<sup>15</sup> is also a work which quite as powerfully paints the compelling attractiveness of wealth, revealing that no one felt this lure more keenly than Edith Wharton herself. Yet to so identify her with Lily as to say that the former "does not want Lily to be

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Ecclesiastes 7:4 - 4 - "The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth."

<sup>14</sup>Jay Martin, Harvests of Change: American Literature 1865-1914 (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1967), p. 270.

<sup>15</sup>Diana Trilling, "The House of Mirth Revisited," Harper's Bazaar, 81 (December 1947), 127.

different from what she is," would strongly work against the novel's tragic theme. Mrs. Wharton delineated only what she sincerely believed: to be forced to choose between moral decency and an inferior standard of living is a terrible choice for anyone in whom the moral and the aesthetic sense are so close together. Lily's dilemma arises mainly out of an ability to unite the two senses —

She had been fashioned to adorn and delight; to what other end does nature round the rose-leaf and paint the humming-bird's breast? And was it her fault that the purely decorative mission is less easily and harmoniously fulfilled among social beings than in the world of nature? That it is apt to be hampered by material necessities and complicated by moral scruples?

These last were the two antagonistic forces which fought out their battle in her breast during the long watches of the night (p. 301).

The fact that these battles yield no victories is the tragedy of Lily. In the words of Curtis Dahl, "[That] a person of such superior stature as Lily, as replete with inner beauty as with social poise, should be unable to alleviate herself from the trivialities of social prejudices is indeed the tragedy of the novel."<sup>16</sup>

Many critics argue that since Mrs. Wharton evades the issue of moral choice in Lily, she relieves her of all moral responsibility. Consequently, Lily is disqualified as a tragic heroine and becomes pitiable rather than tragic.<sup>17</sup> Thus Blake Nevius remarks: "In the naturalistic tradition, the

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<sup>16</sup>Curtis Dahl, "Edith Wharton's 'The House of Mirth': Sermon on a Text," Modern Fiction Studies, 21 (Winter 75-76), 576.

<sup>17</sup>See Marilyn Lyde, Edith Wharton, p. 136.

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action of 'The House of Mirth,' is all denouement, for Lily's conflict with her environment — no more than the feeble and intermittent beatings of her wings against the bars of 'the great gilt cage' — is mortgaged to defeat," and "although we are asked to believe that two sides of her personality are struggling for possession, there is no possibility of a genuine moral conflict until near the end of the action, when as a result of suffering she experiences the self-realization which is the condition of any moral growth."<sup>18</sup> Such criticism, though not entirely unfounded, shows a certain lack of sensitivity, for besides offering the subtle moral choice to Lily throughout the novel, Wharton also provides a last moral conflict. Lily is faced with a "genuine" moral dilemma: by using Bertha Dorset's letters to Selden, she can not only rid herself of social ignominy, but also reclaim her position in society and acquire a rich husband in the bargain. The act also offers Lily the option of wreaking vengeance on the Dorsets for their shabby treatment of her. But there is in Lily an innate moral dignity, a spiritual richness, an ultimate standard of integrity which she cannot betray. She cannot stoop to blackmail even to clear herself of slander which has ruined her life.

Besides, the scandal would also affect Selden. Lawrence Selden — the one man honest in his convictions and contented in his small idealistic world — the one man Lily had always

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<sup>18</sup>Blake Nevius, Edith Wharton (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1953), p. 56.

admired, trusted, loved. In the one courageous act of her life, displaying a rare moral consciousness and constancy, she decides to renounce the prizes she had been trained to seek. Disregarding a society that only destroys as it gratifies, she finds it impossible to commit a final act of self-desecration. Attaining a level of high moral dignity, she burns the letters, and with them, her hopes of regaining the pleasures of her past life. Lily's fineness of grain and her independence of spirit prevent her from harvesting the profit of another's misfortune. Surely, her moral choice bestows the status of a tragic heroine on Lily Bart.

In the wavering drama of Lily's hesitations, there is just one friend who is both near enough to affect her, yet far enough to have kept himself free of any involvement with the vicissitude in her life. Selden knows as well as Lily that if she is to create an existence of finer values for herself it can be only with his help. Yet between them, they fail. Lily, cast off by the crowd for her failure to deal with them on terms of spiritual compromise, does not, at the moment of need, find the outstretched hand -

Selden - "To keep a kind of republic of the spirit - that's what I call success."

Lily - "There was no one, I mean, to tell me about it."

Selden - "There never is - it's a country one has to find the way to one's self" (p. 68).

Throughout the story, Selden moves towards Lily from behind an armour of emotional self-protection, always afraid to give over to the commanding impulse, always defending

himself against the very involvement he most desires for himself. Selden believes that life fully led must satisfy both his own moral habit of self-righteousness and the indulgence of his keenest sensitivities. He projects this ambivalence into his notion of femininity too -- "Life shorn of either feeling appeared to him a diminished thing, and nowhere was the blending of the two ingredients so essential as in the character of a pretty woman" (p. 246), and though he does not want to marry a girl who is merely "nice," (p. 27), Lily unadorned would also fail to sustain his interest. Selden luxuriates in Lily's decorative quality which he would have her retain, but abhors the material world that sustains it. She is merely a connoisseur's delight for him -- an object to be placed on the mantelpiece and admired, not to be clasped close to the heart and cherished. In a perceptive analysis of Selden's character, Cynthia Wolff remarks, "There is first the self-indulgence of his appreciation of her, then the startled guilty awareness of the monetary implications of even such indulgence as this; then disapproval . . . and finally the longing to see such beauty allied in some indefinable way with the lofty virtue that his nature craves."<sup>19</sup> She considers his entire attitude towards Lily as one of moral-aesthetic ambiguity. In Lily's revivification alone of Reynold's portrait, "Mrs. Lloyd," is Selden's demand for a moral-aesthetic being fully satisfied.

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<sup>19</sup>Cynthia Wolff, "Lily Bart and the Beautiful Death," American Literature, 46 (March 1974), 28.

These ambiguities in Selden's character make him reluctant to permit serious emotional ties and he tries to evade responsibility by finding Lily deficient. In order to be worthy of Selden's "collection," Lily must not waver in her disdain for the "things" of this world: as little as a fleeting hesitation will betray sufficient flaw. In the quiet of the sensitive scene between Lily and Selden, the shrill horn of a motor car strikes the note of discord, breaking the dreamlike quality of the communion. Lily falters, remembering the excuse she has made to other guests, and Selden's somewhat softened manner retreats into a harsh attitude of contempt. Thence, she evokes little more than ironic, detached disapproval from him. Instead of offering her any genuine moral help, he merely stands aloof, stern, contemptuous, judgemental, admiring her loveliness, yet aware that "she was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate." Her sorrows to him are trivial, artificial, "even her weeping was an art" (p. 115). His erroneous conception of a lofty idealism pictures her as definitely divided from him, "by the crudeness of a choice which seemed to deny the very difference he felt in her — the choice in which she was content to rest: in the stupid costliness of the food and the showy dullness of the talk, in the freedom of speech which never arrived at wit and the freedom of act which never made for romance" (p. 216). What Selden refuses to perceive is that Lily never believed in the freedom of speech or action, that she was not "content

to rest" in the world of her preference, that she was a terribly restless spirit and that she had never made a choice for herself. Her environment was the one she had been born and initiated into, cultivated only by habit and certainly not by "choice."

His attitude of sustained condemnation wears away Lily's confidence. Aware of his handicaps and hesitations, she is yet attracted by his intellectual superiority and social detachment — "the happy air of viewing the show objectively, of having points of contact outside the great gilt cage in which they were all huddled for the mob to gape at, where most of the captives were like flies in a bottle and having once flown in could never regain their freedom" (p. 54). Selden's distinction was that he had never forgotten the way out. Lily's tragedy arises from the fact that Selden entices her with a vision of a life better than the one she is accustomed to, yet fails to give her the masculine support and unquestioning faith which might enable her to live by that vision:

You despise my ambitions — you think them unworthy of me! . . . Well, isn't that a tribute? I think them quite worthy of most of the people who live by them! Why do you do this to me? . . . Why do you make the things I have chosen seem hateful to me if you have nothing to give me instead?"  
(pp. 113-114)

— Lily's outburst almost but not entirely breaks his stance of ironic detachment, and before it can threaten his isolated pride, his first impulse is retreat.

The fear of the censorious judgement of the world serves for Selden the unconsciously welcome function of protecting him against his desires, and though he loves Lily

on his own terms, he cannot "help" her surmount the weaknesses of her nature. A lack of trust and an intolerance for imperfection further render him incapable of knowing her true character and she can but exclaim piteously, "I needed the help of your belief in me." Incapable of spontaneous love and instinctual faith in her, he cannot manage to reinforce Lily's crippling hopes. Only in the end is Lily vindicated by the cheque to Trenor in full payment of the money he had advanced her. The accident of its being open saves Lily's esteem, for even in this last moment Selden is not unwilling to condemn her: "All too ready to accuse Lily of self-interest even then, he suffers from a sort of moral aloofness that turns his republic of the spirit into an exclusive island for dilettantes," observes Gargano.<sup>20</sup> He cannot rely on naive trust even then to clear the debris of suspicion from his mind. In fact it is his alternate rhythm of involvement and withdrawal, advance and retreat, admonition and disinterest that baffles Lily throughout and thoroughly incapacitates her for decisive action. Deriding her choice yet never proposing a better alternative, boasting of idealism yet fearful of social judgement, Selden contributes largely to Lily's social and moral downfall.

At the end, however, it is Lily who emerges less morally inert and wiser. As shall be seen in the next chapter dealing with the consequences of Lily's and Selden's 'choice,'

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<sup>20</sup>James Gargano, "'The House of Mirth': Social Futility and Faith," American Literature, 44, No. 1 (March 1972), 142.



it is Lily who recognizes the cause of their evasions and tortured waverings to be their imprisonment in the "great gilt cage" of society. She realizes too that "in reality . . . the door never clanged, it stood always open." But the cage had had an irresistible allurements which Lily and Selden could not refuse. Not till the end - and then only ambiguously does Lily manage to step out of the cage and into death.

Edith Wharton's next novel suggestively titled The Fruit of the Tree (1907), deals with the theme of moral choice and the limits of individual responsibility in a much more organized and deliberate manner than The House of Mirth. Here the theme is projected through the treatment of euthanasia, which presents intriguing possibilities to a novelist who believed that moral issues alone guaranteed the life of fiction, "Every great novel must first be based on a profound sense of moral values . . . ." <sup>21</sup> The familiar theme — a despairing sense of entrapment, a deep longing for freedom, and the ultimate failure to escape pulsates throughout the narration, along with a profound consideration of duty and commitment.

In Justine Brent, Edith Wharton created one of the most comely and intriguing heroines of American literature. Blake Nevius says: "none of Edith Wharton's heroines, (I think it can be said,) contains so much of herself as does Justine Brent. She stands in relation to her creator as Maggie Tulliver does to George Eliot, and for that reason, undoubtedly, she is

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<sup>21</sup> Edith Wharton quoted in The Oxford Companion to American Literature, ed., James Hart (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 908.

more sympathetically presented than any other woman in Edith Wharton's novels . . . .<sup>22</sup> And this is the reason she lent to Justine a number of her own characteristics — her ironic temper, her cultivated and amused sense of humour, her quickness and warmth of spirit, her intense moral seriousness. She has a steely determination, and unlike Lily, her own firm center of belief. Wharton tells us that she "felt with her brain" and possessed moral independence as well as Edith Wharton's own restlessness of spirit. In the frivolous society of Lynbrook, she finds a lack of "all sense of that vaster human consciousness," and like her creator yearns for "a life in which the high chances of doing should be mated with the finer forms of enjoyment." Nevertheless, and like her creator again, she cannot resist the lure for the "finer graces of luxurious living, to the warm lights on old pictures and bronzes, the soft mingling of tints in faded rugs and panellings of time-warmed oak." Yet the high value she places on the "decorative side of life" is modified, as in Selden, by the realization that the settings furnished by wealth and "taste" are worthless without the richness of mind and spirit which helps to create the "freer world of ideas."

Condemned as a nurse to participate in the horror, pain and misery of life, she is yet not unaware of its beautiful facets recovered "under the aspect of graceful leisure." She has a free and restless spirit that longs for experience,

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<sup>22</sup>Blake Nevius, Edith Wharton, p. 104.

"I want something dazzling and unaccountable to happen to me — something new and unlived and indescribable!" Unlike Lily, though she too is attracted towards luxury and contentment, yet she is careful enough not to let it crush her sense of freedom. — "I've always been afraid good clothes might keep my wings from sprouting."<sup>23</sup>

Edith Wharton develops her character at length, portraying her as "a creature tingling with energy, a little fleeting particle of the power that moves the sun and other stars" (p. 222). The purpose perhaps was to show how a person with such sources of power and drive of spirit is rendered ineffective by the deadening influences of life at Lynbrook. These influences, paradoxically, also arouse these tendencies in Justine to a greater intensity, "as a suffocated person will suddenly develop abnormal strength in the struggle for air" (p. 223).

In John Amherst, we have an industrial reformer with a zeal for improvement but a lack of imagination and tenacity of purpose. In accordance with the criticism levelled against most Wharton heroes, he is rather weak, morally and socially. Activated by a mill accident, he wants to remove the conditions which have caused it and in the process finds himself up against "one of those conservative family groups that often dominated American factory towns . . ."<sup>24</sup> who are complacent

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<sup>23</sup>Edith Wharton, The Fruit of the Tree (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1907), p. 145. Later references to the book shall be incorporated in the text.

<sup>24</sup>Edmund Wilson, "Justice to Edith Wharton," The Wound and the Bow (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1947), rpt. in Edith Wharton, TCV, p. 22.

in luxury and self-interest, never sparing a thought for those who have made these possible.

Overwhelmed by a strong infatuation for the sophisticated mill-owning widow Bessy Westmore, he is deluded into thinking that she shares his interest in reform. Vain, shallow, self-centred and sentimental, Bessy is one of the "most harrowing victims of the plan of bringing up [our] girls in the double bondage of expedience and unreality, corrupting their bodies with luxury and their brains with sentiment." For a time entranced by his vision of social reform and his devotion to it, she marries him, and as expected, loses all interest in his plans. Perhaps it was Amherst and his passionate zeal for reform which had attracted her and not a genuine sympathy for the undertrodden mill-workers. A relationship built on such uncertain emotions and illusory grounds naturally does not survive. Amherst develops into a frustrated idealist and Bessy into an unreasoning rebel, where to defy Amherst becomes her creed. Divorce, still a "harsh evil" is not suited to one of Bessy's "soft" nature. A small dialogue between Bessy's father and his well wisher, Mrs. Ansell, is here noteworthy. She protests against a divorce for Bessy:-

"Bessy will never be happy in the new way."

"What do you call the new way?"

"Launching one's boat over a human body — or several as the case may be."

This dialogue sums up not only Edith Wharton's comment on the permissive freedom of the modern generation and its consequence for human happiness, but also the moral issue of the book in a nutshell. The morality of an act is evaluated, always, in terms of its cost to others.

It is here that Justine comes into the novel with her urge for freedom, her richness of spirit and her unbounded zest for life. She is by nature a restorer, a redresser, and as she once tells Amherst — her tendencies to direct and hasten by personal intervention time's slow and clumsy processes had often been in conflict with the restrictions imposed by her profession. And Amherst wisely cautions her — "I was only thinking what risks we run when we scramble into the chariot of the gods and try to do the driving. Be passive - be passive, and you'll be happier!" (p. 162).

But Justine is a being with a restive mind. She will not rest content in letting the gods do the driving. She has her own code of moral conduct and the courage of her convictions. She will not balk at the need to run counter to the dictates of convention, and has no qualms about taking on the reins if she finds the chariot floundering. In the accident resulting in Bessy's injured spine, Justine is drawn to the helm of affairs. Dr. Wyant, her former suitor, is the physician in-charge. In excruciating pain, Bessie lingers between life and death, her life hanging by a gossamer thread. Her ordeal is prolonged by the skill of Wyant, who wishes to keep her alive as long as possible in order to earn a rare credit in medical history. Justine, unsentimental and practical, and at the same time deeply humane, is terribly pained at the senseless torture. She strongly feels that a peaceful death is better than an agonizing life. In the dramatic moments of her dilemma, the implications of moral choice are seen in all their profundity and complexity. The shifting relation

between passion (Edith Wharton tells us earlier that it was extraordinary how Justine could infuse into a principle the warmth and color of a passion!) and duty is here brought into sharp focus. Says Nevius, "The dilemma has been established with some skill, and in such a way as to introduce the utmost complexity into the question of Justine's guilt and her responsibility."<sup>25</sup>

There is conventional religion on one hand, and individual morality on the other, which being a "bastard mixture of instinct and reason,"<sup>26</sup> is a highly personal notion. There is therefore, before Justine the necessity of "choosing between the rational moral solution of a problem and the answer dictated by orthodox religion."<sup>27</sup> Wharton weighs both with equal respect and care:

But where the body has been crushed to a pulp, and the mind is no more than a machine for the registering of sense-impressions of physical anguish, of what use can such suffering be to its owner or to the divine will? (p. 407)

This is Justine's question to the world. "Human life is sacred" is the answer of scientists, Christians, traditionalists and doctors all the world over. "Ah! that must have been decreed by someone who had never suffered!" is Justine's justification (p. 418). Knowing the keen individuality of her friend, Justine is sure that even if Bessy recovered partially, she would never like to live on others' mercy and

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<sup>25</sup>Blake Nevius, Edith Wharton, p. 114.

<sup>26</sup>Marilyn Lyde, Edith Wharton, p. 94.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid, p. 55.

pity. An existence as independent and self-willed as Bessy's could never survive on the fringe of other's existence.

Justine assumes Amherst to be more alive to the problem and free from the bondage of accepted opinion. His marginal annotations in a copy of Bacon help her in her decision.

Justine's moment of action comes in Bessy's mute appeal for the hypodermic needle —

The little instrument lay at hand, besides a newly-filled bottle of morphia. But she must wait — must let the pain grow more severe. Yet she could not turn her gaze from Bessy, and Bessy's eyes entreated her again — Justine! There was really no word now — the whimperings were uninterrupted. But Justine heard an inner voice, and its pleading shook her heart. She rose and filled the syringe — and returning with it, bent above the bed . . . (p. 433).

The ellipsis is deliberate. Sure of the result, we yet hope for Justine. An overdose of morphine has ended Bessy's agony but begun Justine's ordeal, for she has disregarded the injunction of God; He had decreed to Man —

You may eat the fruit of any tree in the garden, except the tree that gives knowledge of what is good and what is bad. You must not eat the fruit of that tree; if you do, you will die the same day. [But the Snake (Evil) had tempted Eve and challenged —]

That's not true; you will not die. God said that because he knows that when you eat it, you will be like God and know what is good and what is bad.<sup>28</sup>

In denying life to Bessy, Justine had trespassed on the territory of God and in doing what she thought "good," had accidentally stumbled on what was "evil." With a hesitant

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<sup>28</sup> See Bible, Genesis II.

whisper, Edith Wharton seems to hazard the thought that religious injunctions are often baseless, vicious, and cruel, formulated by men to justify the ways of God. At times, the gods merely like to sport with lives and delight in inflicting unmerited suffering. Moreover, they are jealous of their prerogatives, and like Sartre's Zeus, waste no time in hounding those who have dared to be "free" enough to destroy their sport.

However, frightened as it were, by her own blasphemous thoughts, yet applauding Justine's act, Wharton shrinks back into Puritanic inhibitions, and in the tragic denouement of the novel (which shall be analysed in the following chapter), there is an unceasing effort to find "a way of harmonising the dissecting intellect with the accepting soul."<sup>29</sup>

It is the Puritan in Edith Wharton, who is always insisting that along with the decorative and comparatively comfortable side of life, the stark, unpleasant and ugly side must also be faced. In its grim and unrelenting way, Ethan Frome (1911) is a classic of the realistic genre. It is considered Wharton's most popular and important book and also her most effectively constructed. Her affinities with the American literary tradition<sup>30</sup> were never more evident. A certain Melvillean grandeur had gone into the making of her

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<sup>29</sup> Edith Wharton, A Backward Glance, p. 159.

<sup>30</sup> The conclusions Ethan Frome draws conform to "the great tradition" of F.R. Leavis, for whom the drama of life enfolds itself in pre-eminently moral terms.



tragically conceived hero; and the "spirit of Hawthorne pervades the new England landscape of the novellette and lies behind the moral desolation of Ethan Frome — a desolation as complete in its special manner as that of his namesake — Ethan Brand."<sup>31</sup> But the great and durable vitality of the tale comes from the personal feelings Edith Wharton invested in it - "It was the first subject I had ever approached with full confidence in its value."<sup>32</sup>

The decaying, deserted village is appropriately named Starkfield. It serves a multiple purpose in the book. Not only has it shaped the character of Ethan, but is also a symbol and a chorus — almost a character. In fact nowhere has Edith Wharton exploited the technique of her art more effectively than in Ethan Frome. "It was not until I wrote Ethan Frome," she recalled in her memoirs, "that I suddenly felt the artisan's full control of his implements." The snow that buries the potentially beautiful landscape suggests the repressed aspirations of Ethan — "He seemed a part of the mute melancholy landscape, an incarnation of its frozen woe with all that was warm and sentient in him fast bound below the surface . . ." (p. 14). He has attended college briefly and "has always been more sensitive than the people about him to the appeal of natural beauty." He feels stirrings of imaginative life and to the end "inarticulate flashes" of joy; as a young man

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<sup>31</sup>R.W.B. Lewis, Edith Wharton: A Biography (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 309.

<sup>32</sup>Edith Wharton "Introduction" to Ethan Frome (New York: Charles Scribner's & Sons, 1939 (ed.), p. vii.

he fits up a study in his bare house, nailing up shelves for books, and hanging an engraving of Abraham Lincoln beside a calender with "Thoughts from the Poets." He has been to Florida and has even wanted "to live in towns, where there were lectures, and big libraries and fellows doing things." Yet these meagre aspirations are brutally defeated. Being "imprisoned" in his inspirationless environment, his very qualities of imagination, sensitivity and endurance are shown to intensify his tragedy. "Expressed figuratively," says Elizabeth Ammons in a recent study, "in the frozen unyielding world of Ethan Frome, there is no generative natural order; there is no mother earth. There is only her nightmare reverse image, the witch, figured in Zeena Frome."<sup>33</sup> Though the projection of the witch image in Zeena is rather a strained feat of imagination, it cannot be denied that marriage with Zeena is a dull, loveless duty for Ethan. It is not only his farm that is crippled, but also his marital life with Zeena.

The arrival of Mattie on the scene, Zeena's jealous and cruel attitude towards her, as also the airy, Miranda like ethereal quality of her (Mattie's) being infuses Ethan's dying possibilities with a new life. In the immense darkness of his spiritual and mental life, Mattie Silver, as her name suggests, provides the supreme streak of hope. Not only is she beautiful and freshly young, her lashes beating like

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<sup>33</sup>Elizabeth Ammons, "Edith Wharton's 'Ethan Frome' and the Question of Meaning," Studies in American Fiction, 7, No. 2 (Autumn 1979), 129.

"netted butterflies," but she is also alive to Ethan's affinity with nature, and they share a perfect communion -

She had an eye to see and an ear to hear;  
he could show her things and tell her things,  
and taste the bliss of feeling that all he  
imparted left long reverberations and echoes  
he could wake at will (p. 33).

Wharton skilfully projects through symbols Ethan's attraction towards Mattie and his repulsion for Zeena. These are few but impressive, arise easily from the significant grounds of character and situation, and as Lubbock says are "the natural and sufficient channels of great emotion." The characters in this novel never speak enough to reveal the emotional entanglements and moral dilemmas they are faced with. Wharton resorts to imagery and symbolism to overcome their natural reticence (and perhaps her own). Kenneth Bernard suggests that it is the imagery of light and dark which is used to project her characters' moral dilemma.<sup>34</sup> Frome is all "dark" emotionally. Mattie provides the "broad bands of yellow light." It is during the "night walks" that Ethan feels most intensely an attraction for Mattie. It is their "night" alone in Zeena's absence, that sets off the final moral crisis. And finally, it is in the "dark shade of the Varnum spruces," that mute intimations give way to passionate avowals of love. And it is these spruces on a "dark moonless night" which lead to their ultimate decision — Death — the blackest of blackness.

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<sup>34</sup>K. Bernard, "Imagery and Symbolism in 'Ethan Frome,'" College English, 23 (Dec. 1961), 178-84.

The contrast employed by Edith Wharton throughout the story between indoors and outdoors also serves the same function, as Joseph Brennan shows in his brilliant study on the use of metaphor in Ethan Frome.<sup>35</sup> Says he, "the house is symbolic of moral convention and conformity, and the open countryside . . . of natural freedom and passional abandon" (p. 350).

In Ethan and Mattie's night alone at home in Zeena's absence, symbolism plays a particularly important part. Edith Wharton could have demonstrated overtly Ethan's and Mattie's moral transgression. But such obtuse techniques are not her ploy. With great reticence and modesty, she describes the prosaic dinner, the deliberate serving of pickles and the shattering of the dish. Zeena's cat becomes her watchful surrogate — "the cat jumped into Zeena's chair . . . and lay watching them with narrowed eyes." In its cunning and languid domesticity, it is the perfect representative of its mistress. Moving stealthily away from the milk-jug it shatters the red-pickle dish and succeeds in disrupting their perfect evening. Every action, every word, every moment of silence leading to this climax, quivers with suggestions. Yet the moral responsibility of the characters' is nowhere denied. With a minimum of direct statement and a brilliant use of symbols, Wharton succeeds in conveying the moral violation of Ethan and Mattie,

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<sup>35</sup> Joseph X. Brennan, "'Ethan Frome': Structure and Metaphor," Modern Fiction Studies, 7, No. 4 (Winter 1961-62), 347-56.

a clearer expression of which led to the proscription of Dreiser's books.

As for the dish itself, "only if it is properly understood," says Bernard, "can it be seen how Mattie's violation is a sacrilege, as Zeena's emotions amply testify."<sup>36</sup> The dish (the vow of fidelity) though broken by Zeena's (cat) own doing (Ethan even wishes to "glue it together") can never be the same again. Before he sets about "cementing" it, Zeena arrives. Wharton's description here - "They stood and stared at each other, pale as culprits," (1970 ed - p.51) is not without significance. The violation is unpardonable and irrevocable.

Zeena does not discover the broken dish, unless she suffers [significantly] a heartburn, and is looking for her powders. The scene that follows is a symbolic recognition of the fact that Mattie has usurped her place in Ethan's life. Ethan was ceremonially and morally Zeena's, and despite the fact that she had hardly ever been a real wife to him, she accuses Mattie, "You waited till my back was turned, took the thing I set most store by of anything I've got. You're a bad girl, Mattie Silver, and I've always known it. . . . and now you've took from me the one I cared for most of all —" (1970 ed., pp. 62-3). She carries the shattered remains of her marriage "as if she carried a dead body . . . ." This is the only time Wharton gives a sympathetic portrayal of Zeena Frome. As she stands confronting the guilty lovers, holding

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<sup>36</sup>Kenneth Bernard, "Imagery and Symbolism in Ethan Frome," 183.

the fragments of her beloved pickle dish, her face streaming with tears, we get a sudden glimpse of her impoverished emotional life. The novelist's compassion can reach no further. Here in Zeena Frome is a woman wronged, a woman destroyed, a woman naturally vindictive. I have particularly detailed Wharton's symbolic use of the pickle dish to emphasize her sense of propriety and natural reticence in dealing with moral issues.

Zeena's decision to send Mattie off brings to a climax the moral crisis of the novel. Zeena seems then to Ethan to be a "mysterious alien presence, an evil energy secreted from the long years silent brooding" (p. 58). A sense of wasted effort, of a life of hardship and unjustified suffering, wells up in Ethan -

The passion of rebellion had broken out in him again. That which had seemed incredible in the sober light of day had really come to pass, and he was to assist as a helpless spectator at Mattie's banishment. His manhood was humbled by the part he was compelled to play and by the thought of what Mattie must think of him. Confused impulses struggled in him as he strode to the village. He had made up his mind to do something, but he did not know what it would be (p. 68).

It is important here to mention Professor Trilling's allegation against Ethan Frome's moral content. According to him, "It presents no moral issues, sets off no moral reverberation," because "literature is charmed by energy and dislikes inertia. It characteristically represents morality as positive action . . . by its energy of reason, of choice." He elaborates his view by saying that Ethan does nothing by moral

election, "His duties as a son are discharged because he is a son; his duties as a husband are discharged because he is a husband." And when brought to a moral crisis by having to choose between his duty to his wife and his inclination for the girl he loves, "it is quite impossible for him to deal with the dilemma in the high way that literature and moral philosophy prescribe, by reason and choice;" for, "Choice is incompatible with his idea of existence. He can only elect to die."<sup>37</sup> However, as we shall see, Edith Wharton is not at all indifferent to the moral impact of her books. On the contrary, moral content is the very kernel, the very basis, of her work. If there is moral inertia in The House of Mirth it is only to emphasize the value and inevitability of moral choice. The not making of moral decisions at crucial moments, is itself the moral of her book. In Ethan Frome, however, the charge of moral inertia is totally unmerited. Frome discharges his duty as a son, not because of inertia but because he has a high esteem for the traditions of duty towards parents and genuine respect and concern for his aged mother. The love and self-sacrifice is mutual. As for his duty as a husband, it is not performed as a lack of moral assertion but only because Ethan suffers from a sense of insecurity and want of self-confidence. He marries Zeena not because he wants a wife, but because he needs a replacement for his mother. Moreover

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<sup>37</sup>Lionel Trilling, "The Morality of Inertia," Great Moral Dilemmas, ed., Robert MacIver (New York: Harper & Bros., 1956), rpt. in Edith Wharton, TCV, pp. 140, 143-44.

he wants protection and love without having to give them.

His later insistence to Mattie to sit behind him on the sled is evidence of this need in Ethan — "Because I — Because I want to feel you holding me" (p. 83).

As for choice, it certainly is not incompatible with his life. Edith Wharton is, as I suggested earlier, very conscious of this "high prescription of literature and Ethics." After a series of confusions, deliberations and vacillations. Ethan does make a choice — in favour of Mattie. Throughout the book the struggle is evident through various contrasts. Mattie represents change, freedom, fulfillment. Zeena is an embodiment of monotony, imprisonment, craving. Zeena is seen in the lamplit house — symbolic of conformity and order, Mattie in the dark of forests, waking in him the desires of passion and rebellion. Mattie, as Zeena never does, makes Ethan feel the springs of his youth and masculinity. He wants to preserve the feeling of her hair into his hand, "so that it would sleep there like a seed in winter" (p. 82). Seed — a symbol of regeneration and fulfillment. Zeena only makes him conscious of his frozen masculinity and the ice of accumulated winters. Zeena is associated in his mind with reality and death. Mattie offers dreams and life:-

Confused notions of rebellion stormed in him. He was too young, too strong, too full of the sap of living, to submit so easily to the destruction of his hopes. Other possibilities had been in him, possibilities sacrificed, one by one, to Zeena's narrow-mindedness and ignorance. And what good had come of it? She was a hundred times bitterer and more discontented than when he had married her: the one pleasure left her was to inflict pain on him. All the healthy instincts of self-defence rose up in him against such waste . . . (p. 64).



He considers and reconsiders - And what of Zeena's fate? . . . Well, she could go back to her people then and see what they would do for her. It was the fate she was forcing on Mattie - why not let her try it herself? By the time she had discovered his whereabouts, and brought suit for divorce, he would probably - wherever he was - be earning enough to pay her a sufficient alimony. And the alternative was to let Mattie go forth, alone, with far less hope of ultimate provision (p. 65).

He decides to borrow from the kind-hearted Hales on the excuse of Zeena's ill-health and to run off West with Mattie. But at "the sudden perception of the point to which his madness had carried him, the madness fell and he saw his life before him, as it was" (p. 70). Zeena was feeble and destitute and even if he had the heart to desert her he could do so only by deceiving two kindly people who had sympathised with him. Conventional morality in the form of Mrs. Hale, who chances to speak kindly to him at the very moment he is about to take the first step toward revolt, becomes the final obstacle. It reminds him that convention represents an ideal of good faith which he cannot willingly betray, even though it has made a ruin of his own life. Finally, "He turned and walked slowly back to the farm."

However, Ethan's moral dilemma does not end here. A last and final crisis is presented when Ethan drives Mattie to the station. The thought of returning home to a meagrely lit desolate room, with a querulous Zeena, depresses him terribly. Mattie suggests they continue to communicate through letters at times. But this offers no consolation to Ethan. How could the life of her smile, the warmth of her voice be communicated through cold paper and dead words!

"Oh, what good'll writing do? I want to put my hand out and touch you. I want to be there when you're sick and when you're ~~lone~~some" (p. 78). The "erratic impulse" that prompts Ethan to suggest coasting at that late hour is once again an expression of his insecurity, of his refusal to accept life without Mattie. The last minute conflict leads to a bid for suicide elected by reason and choice, and not merely by impulse, as is carefully shown by Wharton's dexterous use of words in describing the crash:

The big tree loomed bigger and closer, and as they bore down on it, he thought: It's waiting for us, it seems to know. But suddenly his wife's face, with twisted, monstrous lineaments thrust itself between him and his goal and he made an instinctive movement to brush it aside. The sled swerved in response, but he righted it again, kept it straight, and bore down on the black projecting mass. There was a last instant when the air shot past him like millions of fiery wires, and then the elm . . . (pp. 83-84) (emphasis mine).

As often in Wharton, the ellipsis, more than the words, emphasizes the deliberate moral choice of Ethan and Mattie. There is definite "dealing with the dilemma . . . by reason and choice" and morality is presented as "positive action." Thus Edith Wharton succeeds in driving home the fact that in the last analysis, it is their own responsibility that condemns Ethan and Mattie to a life of sterile expiation.

Amid the bewildering scenes of the postwar world, cut off from the America of her youth, Edith Wharton felt a strong urge to get back in touch with her gracious and well ordered past. Looking across the vast abyss created by the war, she located the lost America in the New York of her girlhood — a safe, narrow, unintellectual and hidebound world, but

through the misty clouds of time and history, an endearing and an honorable one. It was there that she set the main action of The Age of Innocence (1920), a suavely ironic evocation of New York in the 1870s, blending Mrs. Wharton's nostalgia with criticism of its genteel timidities and evasions.

The theme is closely related to that of The House of Mirth and Ethan Frome: the frustration of a pair of lovers caused by social or domestic obstructions. "But setting it back in the generation of her parents," observes Edmund Wilson, "she is able to contemplate it without quite the same rancor, to soften its sharpness with a poetic mist of distance . . . . Yet even here the old impulse of protest still makes itself felt as the main motive."<sup>38</sup> The protest, here, is not directed against an individual or convention as much as against a society, a world, a whole history of American sensibility. This was a society, as Lubbock recalls in his memoirs, "conscious of itself, aware of its order, sufficient for its needs . . . . It had its choice traditions, not old enough to have loosened or diverged; its organized forms, too plain to be ignored; its customary law, too distinct and categorical to be evaded."<sup>39</sup> Emotions, conflicts, temptations, desires — all occur in the book; but always slightly below the surface —

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<sup>38</sup> Edmund Wilson, "Justice to Edith Wharton," New Republic, 95 (June 29, 1938), 212.

<sup>39</sup> Percy Lubbock, "Portrait of Edith Wharton," Edith Wharton, TCV, p. 10.

the impeccable, neatly laundered, lace-edged surface — and communicate themselves only through mute signs or well-bred whispers.

Newland Archer, the dilettante bachelor is so much a product of his society that he enters the Opera House at a fashionably late hour because it was "not the thing" to arrive early. He is the willing accomplice of a society "wholly absorbed in barricading itself against the unpleasant" and "Nothing about his betrothed pleased him more than her resolute determination to carry to its utmost limits that ritual of ignoring the 'unpleasant,' in which they had both been brought up."<sup>40</sup> In the story that follows Edith Wharton shows what this innocence costs and what is the price paid by Archer to preserve the concepts of "Taste" and "Form." Yet in matters intellectual and artistic, Archer feels himself to be distinctly the superior of those "chosen specimens of old New York gentility." He had probably read more, thought more and even seen a good deal more of the world. One of the first things we learn about him is that he has had an involvement with a married woman "whose charms had held his fancy through two mildly agitated years." Though he "thanked heaven that he was a New Yorker and about to ally himself with one of his own kind," yet he is not entirely unprepared for a sentimental dalliance with his fiancée's beautiful cousin, Ellen.

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<sup>40</sup>Edith Wharton, The Age of Innocence (New York: Charles Scribner's & Sons, 1968), pp. 2-3. Further references to the book are incorporated in the text itself.

Ellen Olenska is dangerous and fascinating. Europe clings to her like a troubling perfume; her very fan beats Venice! Venice! every diamond is a drop of Paris! In deep contrast to May's floral white entry at the opera, Ellen's appearance is dark and jewelled. Viola Hopkins believes that the little details of Ellen's "shocking" gown are important because just as his late coming characterizes Archer, "Ellen's décolletage as well as the reactions to it at the opera, places for us dramatically both Ellen and New York society; and reveals important shades of differences in taste and custom, that presage further conflict and complications."<sup>41</sup> Such details also reveal the characters of the main protagonists. Ellen delights in revolting and shocking, in being different. Archer shrinks from doing anything which is "not the thing."

It is the ultimate effect of Ellen's grace, her femininity, her exquisite taste and her suspected taint of corruption which gradually overwhelms Archer's thoughts and affections. Her sophisticated intellectualism and her deep power for life's analysis and for the dissection of its moral codes almost brings a revolution in Archer's moral ideas, however unwillingly. He begins to realize that:

Untrained human nature was not frank and innocent, it was full of the twists and defenses of an instinctive guile. And he felt himself oppressed by this creation of factitious purity, so cunningly

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<sup>41</sup>Viola Hopkins, "The Ordering Style of 'The Age of Innocence,'" American Literature, 30, No. 3 (Nov. 1958), 353.

social opposition, her refusal to resign herself to the "collective interest" arouse the rebel in Archer. Definitely displaying the "courage of passion," he exclaims resolutely to Ellen, "We've no right to lie to other people or to ourselves. We won't talk of your marriage; but do you see me marrying May after this?" (p. 133). However, it is Ellen's gentle persuasion not to build their happiness on the shattered remains of another's dreams, the strength of her belief in his innate "goodness" as well as Archer's lack of faith in the impalpable relationship between them, which lead him to opt for marriage with May. And of course, "it was less trouble to conform with the tradition and treat May exactly as all his friends treated their wives . . . ." (p. 151)

Marriage, however, offers little spiritual fulfillment to Newland Archer. The heavy carpets, the watchfully immaculate servants, the perpetual ticking of disciplined clocks, the constantly renewed stack of cards and invitations on the hall table — the whole chain of tyrannical trifles binding one hour to the next and each member of the household to the others, threatens to bind Archer's soul. The fact that May could never be capable of the freedom and the "intellectual emotionalism" of Ellen makes Archer restless and dissatisfied: "There was no use in trying to emancipate a wife who had not the dimmest notion that she was not free" (p. 151). Further the realization that what he has married is indeed a combination of jewels, furs, motors and the opera, rather than a living, thinking, feeling, pulsating individual, increases Archer's intellectual isolation. The discovery that May's

"only use of the liberty she supposed herself to possess would be to lay it on the altar of wifely adoration" (p. 151), also increases Archer's longing and love for Countess Olenska. The sensitive passages between them in Ellen's drawing-room, in the carriage from the ferry landing, and in the art museum are as deeply tender as those between Mattie and Ethan. But they lack the intimacy and passion of the earlier novella. Here, Wharton lingers on the chaste, aching distance between the couple. The thought of their obligations and separate destinies is never absent from their consciousness. This follows as a result of the perfect balance that Ellen holds between their loyalty to others and their honesty to themselves:

It was clear to him, and it grew more clear under closer scrutiny that if she should finally decide on returning to Europe . . . it would not be because her old life tempted her, even on the new terms offered. No: she would go only if she felt herself becoming a temptation to Archer, a temptation to fall away from the standard they had both set up. Her choice would be to stay near him as long as he did not ask her to come nearer; and it depended on himself to keep her just there, safe and secluded. (p. 189)

In a weak moment in the carriage, driving Ellen to her grandmother's house, Archer displays his lapse from the mutual standard they had set. Expressing his inability to live a sham life, he demands more of Ellen than "an hour or two now and then with wastes of thirsty waiting between." And once again there is a turbulence in their emotions, which is calmed by Ellen's characteristic composure — "We'll look not at visions, but at realities." Archer, desiring Ellen's companionship at the cost of his marriage and his

social position, declares, "I don't know what you mean by realities. The only reality to me is this." But Ellen, once more with her sharp intellect and practical sense, disrupts the magic communion by asking, "Is it your idea, then, that I should live with you as your mistress — since I cannot be your wife?" (p. 221). Confronted by this rude shattering of his vision, hurt to the quick, Archer is brought back to earth with a thud. Once again he tries to opt out of the moral dilemma by replying evasively, "I want - I want somehow to get away with you into a world where words like that - categories like that won't exist; where we shall be simply two human beings who love each other, who are the whole of life to each other: and nothing else will matter" (p. 222). And Ellen's answer is almost a challenge to Archer's moral perceptions — "where is that country? Have you ever been there? . . . I know so many who've tried to find it; and believe me they all got out by mistake at wayside stations . . ." (p. 223). Her decision is final — "There's no us in that sense! We're near each other only if we stay far from each other. Then we can be ourselves. Otherwise we're only Newland Archer, the husband of Ellen Olenska's cousin and Ellen Olenska, the cousin of Newland Archer's wife, trying to be happy behind the backs of people who trust them . . ." (p. 223). Archer is still hopeful, "Ah! I'm beyond that." But Ellen's perfect, mature knowledge of human nature, especially that of Archer's, prompts the bitter comment, "No you're not. You've never been beyond. And I have and I know what it looks like there."



Realizing of the threat she is constantly posing to Archer's marital peace as well as the value of social prestige in old New York, Ellen decides to return to Europe. The ultimate choice to smother their relationship is as much Arther's as Ellen's. He realizes the sum total of his society's smug and selfish conventionality — the fear of innovation as much in decor as in morality. It was the way of old New York of taking life "without effusion of blood" — the way of "people who dreaded scandal more than disease" (p. 256). With his careful lifelong cultivation for the gentilities and sensibilities of his society, Archer has rendered himself unfit for passionate rebellious action. Moreover, May's faith in her wifely devotion has not been in vain. Nor has her suffering and deep love come to nought. It is the very capacity to feel and suffer which has served as a cousinly bond between May and Ellen. Archer, the object of both their loves, has not taken the risk of either. Thus, May now has the last word. The news she gives Archer of his approaching responsibilities as a parent serves as the final deciding factor. Edith Wharton conveys this in a short, telling statement:

Newland Archer was a quiet and self-controlled young man. Conformity to the discipline of a small society had become almost his second nature. It was deeply distasteful to him to do anything melodramatic and conspicuous, anything Mr. Van der Luyden would have deprecated and the club box condemned as bad form (p. 245).

His decision is expected. Though Ellen has the "mysterious faculty of suggesting tragic and moving possibilities outside the daily run of experience," yet she is merely a challenge,

a vision. Though May personifies all the evasions and compromises of his clan, she is, yet, the "safe" alternative, the reality. It is to her that he is socially, conventionally, morally, bound.

In an "ideal" family get-together, May bids farewell to her cousin — a scene which Wharton describes as a tribal ritual celebrating a conquest. It is remarkable in its brilliant use of irony, in its penetrating insight into hypocritical patterns of social behaviour, but mostly for the triumph of moral conventions, as displayed through Archer's final moral choice:

The silent organization which held his little world together was determined to put itself on record as never for a moment having questioned the propriety of Mme. Olenska's conduct, or the completeness of Archer's domestic felicity. All these amiable and inexorable persons were resolutely engaged in pretending to each other that they had never heard of, suspected, or even conceived possible, the last hint to the contrary: and from this tissue of elaborate dissimulation, Archer once more disengaged the fact that New York believed him to be Mme. Olenska's lover. He caught the glitter of victory in his wife's eyes, and for the first time understood that she shared the belief (p. 259).

It is Archer who raises the farewell toast to Countess Olenska and sincerely wishes her, on behalf of his family and himself, a hearty "Bon Voyage!"

In thus presenting the twilight of her race, Edith Wharton was able to enforce a contract between the old culture and the new, to illuminate, as no other novelist of her generation was easily able to do, a major aspect of American consciousness through the delineation of a dramatic conflict between the impulses and conventions, between passion and

duty, between a life of the senses and a life of the feelings. Moreover, she tried to define, as Blake Nevius says, "the nature and limits of individual responsibility, to determine what allowance of freedom or rebellion can be made for her trapped protagonist, without at the same time threatening the structure of society."<sup>43</sup>

In all the books analysed here, Wharton is concerned essentially with the question: What is the extent of one's moral obligation to those individuals, who, legally, or within the framework of existing traditions, apparently have the strictest claim on one's loyalty? This question occupies the centre of Edith Wharton's moral consciousness, as revealed in her fiction.

Often accused of remaining "tethered to her native backyard," and unable to delineate life other than as projected in old New York, Edith Wharton has often not been sympathetically understood and evaluated. She, no doubt, writes primarily of New York society, but that is because she had a firm grasp of what "society" in every sense was made up of. She understood that it was arbitrary, capricious and inconsistent, ruthless and self-preservative. She was aware that it did not hesitate to abolish its standards, while vehemently proclaiming them. She knew when money could be functional and when it was merely a fashionable asset; when dignity of lineage was important and when it was only an obstacle for spiritual fulfillment. She knew that compromises were the

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<sup>43</sup>Blake Nevius, Edith Wharton, p. 10.

easy solution, but that they were rarely made while still considered compromises. Like Jane Austen, Edith Wharton was happy with her "two inches of ivory," but the ivory here was more polished, and contained a wealth of moral value. Though aware of the decadence of ancient culture, she yet realizes the "good" inherent in certain old traditions. Disregard of these traditions leads to the thinning of the bond that holds one to life, and leaves a longing for fulfillment. What is this fulfillment? Is it, according to Wharton's belief, to be achieved through sheer assertion of moral freedom, or, to be gained through conformity to one's conventions? These issues shall be dealt with in the next chapter. Here, it suffices to say that she was a universal artist, too sincere, too committed to her moral obligations as a writer of serious literature to be involved only with her past. As Louis Auchincloss tellingly observes:

She was too concerned with the world around her to write only of the past. She wanted nothing less than to interpret the age in which she lived and to seek out the origin and cause of the increasing number of things in it that angered her . . . .<sup>44</sup>

One of these "things," and perhaps the most significant one for Edith Wharton, was the temptation to break free of tradition and assert one's freedom of choice.

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<sup>44</sup>Louis Auchincloss, Nine American Women Novelists (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1961), p. 35.

## CHAPTER II

### A FLASH IN THE FIRMAMENT

A moral being is one who is capable of comparing his past and future actions and motives — of approving some and disapproving of others; and the fact that man is the one being who with certainty can be thus designated makes the greatest of all distinctions between him and the lower animals . . . . Owing to this condition of mind, man cannot avoid looking backward and comparing the impressions of past events and actions. He also continually looks forward. ~~Hence~~ after some temporary desire or passion has mastered his social instincts, he will reflect and compare the now-weakened impression of such past impulses with the ever present social instinct, and he will then feel that sense of dissatisfaction which all unsatisfied instincts leave behind them . . . . <sup>1</sup>

Darwin's thoughts seem to have made an indelible impression on Edith Wharton, for it is with the "dissatisfaction" accompanying both the "unsatisfied instincts" as well as the assertion of moral will against the tenets of convention with which she essentially concerns herself. It is not that she merely "preaches the antiquated morality of the Old Testament,"<sup>2</sup> i.e., punishment for every breach of convention, but there is hardly any instance in her novels where the choice of self over others leads to a rewarding sense of fulfillment. She is a complexly simple writer telling stories of frustrated

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<sup>1</sup>Charles Darwin, The Descent of Man, I (New York: Appleton & Co., 1872), pp. 374-76. Refer M. Lyde, Edith Wharton: Convention and Morality in the Work of a Novelist, Chapter II-IV.

<sup>2</sup>Harry Hartwick, The Foreground of American Fiction (New York: American Book Co., 1934), pp. 385-87.

lovers, of dissipated marriages and New York societies on the surface, but every incident however "insignificant in itself . . . illustrate[s] some general law, and turn[s] on some deep movement of the soul . . . ." <sup>3</sup> It is her mission to make people aware of this "deep movement of the soul," often expressing itself through a moral revolt leading to tragic expiation. Edith Wharton believes such a revolt to be a miscalculated adventure of the spirit, for it is in the all-embracing comfort of tradition alone that man finds fulfillment.

A good many of Mrs. Wharton's critics have assumed that she was simply a defender of harsh social conventions against all those who, from romantic energy or moral courage, rebelled against the fixed patterns of their hidebound worlds. But the matter of determining exactly where her moral sympathies lie is much more complex than this generalization suggests. Many of her books focus attention upon a clash between a stable society and a sensitive individual who half belongs to and half rebels against it. At the end he must surrender to the social taboos he had momentarily challenged, for, either he has not been able to summon the resources of courage through which to act out his rebellion, or, he has discovered that the punitive power of society is greater than he had supposed, and that the judgement contained in religion through years of experience is the ultimate and the most satisfying.

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<sup>3</sup>Edith Wharton, The Writing of Fiction (New York: Charles Scribners, 1925), p. 146.

Wharton understands only too well how endless is the nagging pain, how large the price that must be paid for a personal assertion against the familiar norms of the world. Yet, it is to be noted, that she has no respect for blind acceptance either, and often expresses her distaste for "sterile pain" and the "vanity of self-sacrifice." Rightly says Irving Howe, "It is hard to imagine another writer in American literature for whom society, despite its attractions of surface and order, figures so thoroughly as a prison of the human soul."<sup>4</sup>

In the postwar world, Wharton found the right to freedom against society expressed as a desire to throw off every kind of restraint imposed on conduct, morals, religion. Each individual sought to escape the common lot, to avoid pain and responsibility, and in doing so, weakened his moral fibre. Liberty had been distorted until all need for order or guidance was totally disregarded, the difference between liberty and license was lost sight of and the satisfaction of every impulse was justified as an expression of the libido — "Man was free at last — freer than his would-be liberators had ever dreamed of making him — and he used his freedom like a beast."<sup>5</sup> It was against such a use of freedom that Edith Wharton turned in disgust, and bent all her energies as a

- See notes  
discussed  
Salisbury  
as a word  
period.

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<sup>4</sup>Irving Howe, "The Achievement of Edith Wharton," Edith Wharton: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup>Edith Wharton, The Valley of Decision, II (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1925), p. 303.

novelist in search of a compromise between freedom and convention.

Though Mrs. Wharton knew how mere conformity with moral norms can lead to a sense of wasted resources and useless sacrifices, she also knew how the need for choice contains within itself the seeds of tragedy, and the impossibility of choice, the sources of pain. If not her most finished work, The House of Mirth is Mrs. Wharton's most powerful one. In it she dramatizes her sense of the pervasiveness of waste in human affairs and the tyranny that cultivated tendencies exert over human will and desire. It is apparent that what captured Wharton in Lily Bart is her ambiguity of purpose, the conflict between her practical good sense and the pull of spirit. In the words of Mrs. Fisher, "Sometimes I think its just flightiness and sometimes I think its because at heart she despises the things she's trying for. And its the difficulty of deciding that makes her such an interesting study."<sup>6</sup> Lily, as we have seen in the previous chapter, is neither at ease with, nor in rebellion against her life as a dependent of the rich, and trapped in her confusions of value, she perpetuates her own fate. What makes Lily one of the most appealing heroines of literature in the tradition of Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina is the ultimate triumph of spirit over good sense, even though the transcendence guarantees destruction. The poignancy of her fate lies in her doomed struggle to

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<sup>6</sup>Edith Wharton, The House of Mirth, p. 189.



subdue that part of her nature which has been cultivated since birth, and through her initiation into a society which she is irresistibly attracted to. In fact, Mrs. Wharton has the courage to recognize that Lily has been tainted by her environment to an irreparable degree. In that world there was but one God, Mammon. "You think we live on the rich . . . but it's a privilege we have to pay for!" It was money that ruled where piety, love, charity or moral strength might have ruled. It was money that granted power and rendered people of Lily's and Selden's potentialities helpless. Moreover, "it was money that in killing Lily Bart announced its miserable triumph over the human spirit."<sup>7</sup>

The moral choice faced by Lily, when reduced to its essentials, was quite simple: it was the necessity of choosing between spiritual and material values, between Selden's "republic of the spirit" and the Trenor—Dorset circle's mise en scene of steam yachts, cards galore and hothouse flowers. Her no-choice was the result of the horror of the alternatives: "dinginess" and poverty on one hand — "I hate ugliness, you know . . . I've always turned from it . . ." (p. 265) and the corrupt standards of society on the other. For Lily, the tragic flaw lay in her weakness for wealth. Anything less than unrestricted financial freedom was dreary poverty for her. Circumstances may have conditioned Lily to accept the social ideal of wealth as the ultimate, yet she

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<sup>7</sup>Diana Trilling, "The House of Mirth Revisited," rpt. in Edith Wharton, TCV, p. 111.

is definitely not denied the moral responsibility for such a belief. Critics like Blake Nevius assert that ". . . so far as the moral significance of action is concerned, Lily remains, until almost the end of the novel, an essentially lightweight and static protagonist." Nevertheless, she has "if only in embryo, certain qualities which make her distinctly worth saving, so that her fate if not tragic according to any satisfactory definition of the term, at least impresses us with the sense of infinite and avoidable waste."<sup>8</sup>

The essential emotions surfacing through the reading of the book are definitely not those of futility and despair, but of a sense of waste due to a moral flaw in character. At every stage, Lily is presented with definite alternatives and she is fully aware of their implications. Realizing the illusory nature of wealth, she yet lacks the courage to reject it, and accepts a sizable amount from Trenor as a personal favor. It is only when Trenor feels that the "investment" he has made entitles him to certain claims upon her, that Lily's moral sensitivities are outraged and she shrinks back in disgust — "She was realizing for the first time that a woman's dignity may cost more to keep up than her carriage and that the maintenance of a moral attribute, should (it) be dependent on dollars and cents, made the world appear a more sordid place than she had conceived it" (p. 169). Wharton never denies Lily the moral responsibility for this outrage on her dignity by Trenor.

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<sup>8</sup>Blake Nevius, Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction, p. 55.

However, Lily Bart's greatest offense against society is her moral superiority, which from time to time, causes her to ignore its more trivial rules and makes her an easy victim of its treachery. There is her frankness, an assertion of her moral superiority in going to Selden's apartment for a cup of tea (against the norms of her society), and in her refusal to blackmail Bertha Dorset in order to clear herself of the false accusations Bertha has made against her as a blind for her own adultery. In terms of Aristotelian tragedy, Lily's tragedy lies in her tragic flaw, i.e., idealism. Thus, her social flaw of superior moral sensitivity incurs the anger of society, and the moral flaw of social ambition as well as idealism, makes Lily susceptible to the judgement which society levies on her. Unable to choose either a regard of social 'ideals' or a life of moral idealism, Lily is held in a tragic impasse. Society's "power of debasing people and ideals" so subjugates her finer instincts that her groping movements toward Selden's "republic of the spirit" are only intermittent and half-hearted. Vacillating between a corrupt society and moral idealism until it is too late, she is finally crushed between them.

There is thus, on the part of Lily a transgression against two orders of law; the high moral standards of the individual soul, an offense which "deserved" punishment; and against the conventions of the social world, which could easily reprobate any individual who defied its authority. The judgement justly, levied on her is punishment — physical and mental. But when we trace the story of a weak and lovely

woman with a strong grain of moral sensitivity and spiritual finesse, torn apart by what Wharton calls "the eternal struggle between man's contending impulses," and denied the outstretched hand of emotional help and unquestioning faith, our hearts are weighed down by the tragedy of her cataclysmic failure, and a punitive judgement pales into love.

Among the romantic heroes in Mrs. Wharton's novel, none is more congenial and "culturally sterile" than Lawrence Selden, who comes to be Lily's conscience as well as her love — "He told me — he warned me long ago, he foresaw that I should grow hateful to myself" (p. 165). But besides warning and cautioning Lily, there is little practical help Selden offers her. He feels an acute sympathy for her but it is marred by his fastidiousness; he loves her but, except for the last moment, not with a love prepared to accept the full measure of its risks. When Lily is beset by psychological and physical deprivation, Selden still lacks the courage and the decisiveness to help her regain a hold on life. Further, he does not wish to accept the fact that he loves her despite her imperfections. There is yet a ray of hope in her anguished words to him:

Once, twice, you gave me the chance to escape from my life, and I refused it, refused it because I was a coward. Afterwards, I saw my mistake. I saw I could never be happy with what had contented me before. But it was too late: you had judged me — I understood. It was too late for happiness — but not too late to be helped by the thought of what I had missed. That is all I have lived on . . . (p. 306)

But Selden is a hardbound conformist who believes in spiritual freedom, while in reality he is irretrievably shackled

to society. The situation between them could have been managed by a sudden explosion of feeling, but the training and beliefs of Selden as a connoisseur and Lily as a "collectable" were against the chances of such an explosion. The emotional need to be loved by Selden, to conform to his concept of virtue are seen in Lily's final effort to reclaim her lost position in his view, through her final act of writing out a cheque to Trenor in full payment of his loan to her. Though Lily succeeds in salvaging her honor in Selden's eyes, she cannot have the fulfillment of his love and faith in her, even during the last years of her life.

By trimming hats at a milliner's, Lily realizes the value and dignity of honest labor — "The mere touch of the packet thrilled her tired nerves with the delicious promise of a night of sleep . . ." (p. 288). Towards the end, her visit to Gerty's club means more to Lily than any of the magnificent parties she had enjoyed at the Trenor's or the Dorset's. By her trials, her moral growth is accelerated and she attains the painful realization that, "There's no turning back. Your old self rejects you, and shuts you out" (p. 155). The irony of Lily's fate is that her best qualities are the most fatal for her and the fact that her tragedy "wears a comic mask makes it even grimmer."<sup>9</sup> From her new perspective, her old friends and her old ideals seem foolish

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<sup>9</sup>Curtis Dahl, "Edith Wharton's 'The House of Mirth': Sermon on a Text," Modern Fiction Studies, 21, No. 4, (Winter 1975-76), 574.

but what makes the book particularly tragic is that Lily gains moral wisdom just before her death, reinforcing the truth of the Biblical dictum — "The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning."

It is the poor working girl, Nettie, and the dedicated social worker, Gerty, whose lives are complete, fulfilling and meaningful, because they have their moral priorities fixed and also the courage to act out their convictions. Not only this, they have the determination to analyse the alternatives and choose a particular way of life. Nettie's little house, with a poor but trusting husband and a winsome child has the "frail audacious permanence of a bird's nest built on the edge of a cliff — a mere wisp of leaves and straw, yet so put together that the lives entrusted to it may hang safely over the abyss" (p. 319). Lily and Selden fail not only because they have their moral priorities all mixed up, but also because they are unable to choose a mode of conduct — "the central truth of existence" therefore, evades their grasp.

The final meaning that emerges clearest from the book is the need for having a set code of moral belief and the courage to choose a particular course of action. A life divided by hesitations, waverings and a search for values is but a life lost:

She [Lily] had a sense of deeper impoverishment — an inner destitution compared to which outward conditions dwindled into insignificance. It was indeed miserable to be poor. But there was something more miserable still — it was the clutch of solitude at heart . . . the feeling of being something rootless and ephemeral, mere spendthrift

of the whirling surface of existence, without anything to which the poor little tentacles of self could cling before the awful flood submerged them. And as she looked back, she saw that there had never been a time when she had had any real relation to life.. (p. 318)

Deprived of love, protection and fulfillment, Lily yearns to be rooted, to belong to someone, to love and be loved. Having renounced the material security of the clique by burning Bertha's letters, (a definite moral choice, at last), she regains relation to life by a moral identification with all of humanity. The symbolic vision of the child in her arms, the craving to prolong, to perpetuate the momentary exaltation of her spirit, the tragic review of lost possibilities — all contribute to giving Lily "a sense of kinship with all the loving and foregoing in the world!" (p. 321). Achieving this sense of "kinship" with the world, she dies fulfilled, with "the love his [Selden's] love had kindled, the passion of her soul for his," glowing like an imperishable flame in her heart.

When finally Selden succeeds in overcoming the deficiencies of a life given to distrust and sheer idealism, it is already too late. Finding at last the "word" he cannot wait to communicate to Lily, he arrives only in time to drop a kiss on her lifeless corpse. Though her death may have been occasioned by a conscious act, or one of thoughtless inattention, in it is captured and fixed for ever her longing for Selden's faith and love. The only Lily he can now cherish is the beautiful idealized memory he carries of her as a flawless portrait, "her 'self' fixed suitably free

from weakness and flaw,"<sup>10</sup> the most superb piece in his "collection," the ultimate apotheosis of her triumphant tableau vivant!!

Edith Wharton, in her stories dealing with the conflict between the superior individual and society, reaches the conclusion that though intuition may have been the foundation of religion, it is reason which should be the foundation of morality. Whether she justifies or indicts revolt, she is positive that individual morality (whether it expresses itself in conformity or as a challenge to the religious order) needs convention as a guide. As a result, departure from the clearly marked paths of conventional conduct can result only in hopeless bewilderment for people with no more than an ordinary sense of direction. Even persons of superior intellect and sensitivity cannot afford to ignore the compass which tradition provides. Lyde points out that "Mrs. Wharton never discounts the possibility of finding truth by turning one's back on convention and although she occasionally suggests that this might have been the right solution . . . , she never actually shows any of her characters doing so."<sup>11</sup> There is a pronounced straining at the seams of conventional morality, as well as a hesitant applause for the heroine in The Fruit of the Tree, but blatant rebellion is shown to be futile.

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<sup>10</sup>Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "Lily Bart and the Beautiful Death," American Literature, 46 (March 1974), 26-27.

<sup>11</sup>Marilyn Lyde, Edith Wharton: Convention and Morality in the Work of a Novelist, p. 95.



A specific condition that needs to be fulfilled before a disregard of convention can be fully justified is: taking into account the mental conditions and emotions of the persons whose fate is bound up with that of the individual seeking revolt. This springs from the obvious truth that "man can commit no act alone, whether for good or evil." Consequently, to abandon convention for oneself is to abandon it for others as well. This is the tragic mistake of Justine Brent. She never doubts the abstract justification of having ended Bessy's useless agony by giving her an overdose of morphine — ". . . She had nothing to fear, since she had done nothing that her own conscience condemned. If the act were to do again, she would do it —." <sup>12</sup> But she fails to take into consideration the repercussions which her act may have upon Amherst, Mr. Langhope, Dr. Wyant and Bessy's little daughter, Cicely — people whose lives were entwined with Bessy's, and whose horror of euthanasia was subject to social convention.

Further, the nature of Justine's relationship with Amherst, although innocent, is uncertain not only in Amherst's, Wyant's and Mr. Langhope's minds, but also in Justine's own —

What if her unconscious guilt went back even farther than his thought dared to track it? She could not now recall a time when she had not loved him . . . was it possible that she had loved him during Bessy's life — that she had even sub-consciously, blindly, been urged by her feeling for him to perform the act? (p. 525)

Wyant is inclined to suspect the same.

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<sup>12</sup>Edith Wharton, The Fruit of the Tree, p. 483. Subsequent references to the book shall be incorporated in the text itself.

Justine's even greater error is her belief that she can go on leading a normal life, that she can even marry Amherst, Bessy's husband, even after having set so wide a gulf between herself and the rest of mankind. Not until she faces the tragic consequences of her act does she understand "how one stone rashly loosened from the laboriously erected structure of human society may produce remote fissures in that clumsy fabric. She saw that having hazarded the loosening of the stone, she should have held herself apart from ordinary human ties, like some priestess set apart for the service of the temple" (p. 555). And instead, she had seized happiness, taken it as a gift from the very fate she had herself precipitated. There is an old Greek saying to the effect that the "gods never forgive the mortal who presumes to love and suffer (and act) like a god." She had dared to do all these and the gods now brought ruin on that deeper self of Justine, from which she drew the essence of living.

The ruin is wrought through the person of Wyant. Two years after her marriage, he reappears, destitute, unemployed and a drug addict, threatening to expose Justine unless she helps him. In spite of her conviction that her action is morally correct, she falls an easy victim to blackmail, not because she is unconsciously afraid of exposure, but because she feels indirectly responsible for Wyant's condition. She had not only temporized with him following Amherst's reappearance on her horizon and spurned ruthlessly his renewed offer of marriage, but had also ruined the case by which he had hoped to reinstate himself in his profession. She,

therefore, responds to his periodic appeals for money until she thoroughly implicates herself, and in the eyes of the world underlines the circumstances pointing to her guilt. Wyant's unconscionable demand that Justine use her influence with her husband's former father-in-law to secure him the post of house physician at a well-known hospital, lands Justine in a grave predicament. Her firm refusal leads Wyant, the baffled and vindictive doctor, to Amherst who is left appalled at hearing the story of Bessy's death and his present wife's share in it. The hitherto idyllic relationship between Amherst and Justine is suddenly dissolved.

There is a painful confrontation in which Justine attempts, in vain, to assure Amherst that she had done only what her conscience and humanity commanded her to do. By repudiating in practice the sentiment inscribed in his copy of Bacon, he withdraws his moral support of Justine's action. His terms are clear — he is not to be implicated in a deed for which Justine must assume the entire responsibility. Professor Lewis rightly observes, "Justine's action may be soundly debatable but John Amherst reveals a stubborn moral obtuseness in not understanding her soul-twisting dilemma, and there is little left of the passionate idealist she had first seen in him."<sup>13</sup> Though her motive was "perfectly sane and justifiable," says Edith Wharton, yet "her fault lay in having dared to rise above conventional restrictions, her

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<sup>13</sup>R.W.B. Lewis, Edith Wharton: A Biography (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 181.

mistake in believing that her husband could rise with her. For her whole life was centred in Amherst and she saw that he would never be able to free himself from the traditional view of her act" (p. 525).

Amherst and Justine continue on an apparently unchanged domestic footing, but before long it is clear to Justine that their marriage is not the same any more. Her desperate attempts to preserve the remains of their idyllic union are of no avail and the elemental touch in their relationship is replaced by the purely sensual: "For a few days, she and Amherst lost themselves in this self-evoked cloud of passion, both clinging fast to the visible, the palpable in their relation, as if conscious already that its finer essence had fled — 'Your mind justifies me — not your heart; isn't that your misery?' she asks Amherst, piteously (p. 527).

The knowledge that Wyant has secured the hospital post after all, makes it imperative that Justine's case be laid before Mr. Langhope (Bessy's father), who has always regarded Justine as an interloper. Though Amherst agrees to perform the disagreeable act of explaining matters to Mr. Langhope, yet Justine, wanting to preserve Mr. Langhope's regard for her husband, beats him to the interview. She confesses her "crime," and reveals herself as guilty, while clearing Amherst totally of any suspicion of complicity. She finally agrees to drop out of her husband's and Cicely's lives at the behest of Mr. Langhope.

By this time her presence has become an embarrassment to Amherst who, on a rebound becomes totally dedicated to

Bessy's mill, her family and their daughter, Cicely. It is now painfully clear to Justine that she has lived her life alone in the recesses of her spirit, in that rarefied moral atmosphere which cannot be penetrated by other people of her world. As Blake Nevius explains, ". . . it is apparent that the larger nature of Justine, which has argued consistently for the freedom to act on its generous impulses, has been betrayed by the smaller natures surrounding it by Wyant, Bessy, Mr. Langhope, but particularly by Amherst, who cannot penetrate to the clear moral atmosphere in which her decisions are formed."<sup>14</sup>

Though heart-breaking for her, Justine's decision to leave Amherst is firm. The house so lovingly built by her is destroyed, the tie between them is forever stained and debased, but most tragic of all, her moral ideals are shattered under the weight of reality, and each moment becomes but a senseless episode in one long saga of misery — "Amherst had not understood her — worst still he had judged her as the world might judge her. The core of her misery was there" (p. 524). Too late has Justine learnt the truth in the commandment, "Thou shalt not take a human life." The purity of the motive being undeniable, the step had been taken with little thought of its possible consequences. It is only after its exposure has destroyed the happiness of several people that the moral issue of Justine's act is seen in all its complexity. While mistakenly trying to cut a

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<sup>14</sup>Blake Nevis, Edith Wharton, p. 116.

path through the "tangled and deep-rooted growth" of human relations, Justine had not considered the fact that every limb which is severed is a human prejudice or weakness:

Because these consequences had caught her in a web of tragic fatality, she would not be guilty of the weakness of tracing back the disaster to any intrinsic error in her original motive. Why, then, if this was her real, her proud attitude toward the past, and since those about her believed in her sincerity, and accepted her justification as valid from her point of view, if not from theirs — why had she not been able to maintain her posture, to carry on life on the terms she had exacted from others? (p. 585).

Towards the end of the novel, Amherst learns of the pact between Mr. Langhope and Justine, and there follows forgiveness on all sides and also a reconciliation between Amherst and Justine. Their marriage is resumed, but on a confined and more guarded level, in which there is "nothing left of that secret inner union which had so enriched and beautified their outward lives" (p. 623).

The last scene of the book shows the soul-searing suffering of Justine, when at the dedication of a worker's recreation project at Westmore, Amherst shows to the audience the original plan for the building as a testimony of Bessy's devotion to their welfare. Justine alone knows that it is in fact Bessy's blueprint for a private swimming pool and gymkhana at Lynbrook, her final extravagant gesture of defiance at Amherst and at his idealistic reformatory plans. That the centre is to be dedicated to Bessy's memory is the final ironical stroke of Fate. Edith Wharton, sympathetically

yet firmly delineates Justine's bitter resentment at the cruel twist of life:

Justine had suffered enough — suffered deliberately and unstintingly, paying the full price of her error, not seeking to evade its least consequence — .  
But no sane judgement could ask her to sit quiet under this last hallucination. This unreal woman, this phantom that Amherst's uneasy imagination had evoked, was to come between himself and her, to supplant her first as his wife, and, then as his fellow-worker (p. 628).

However, as a last act of retribution, she allows Amherst to retain his illusion.

Justine's basic flaw is her inability to compromise, her failure to achieve the exact balance between individual idealism and social convention. Morality, though intent on a search for the absolute truth and on its application to conduct, is yet a highly personal, and often an erratic concept. Edith Wharton therefore implies that it is necessary to insure that the action performed is responsibly executed, not only with regard to the unorthodox individual who is in revolt against the norms of tradition, but also with regard to general humanity. Thus it is that Justine learns, at too high a cost to herself, that it is a "terrible thing, a sacrilegious thing to interfere with another's destiny," to "lay the tenderest touch upon any human being's right to love and suffer after his own fashion." She also realizes that her responsibility was limited, practically if not ideally, by the complexity of human relations and beliefs, and also by the fact that the gods are jealous of their prerogatives:

— That was what her act had taught her —  
that was the word of the gods to the mortal  
who had laid a hand on their bolts (p. 624).

And,

— Justine had paid, yes — paid to the  
utmost limit, of whatever debt toward  
society she had contracted by overstepping  
its laws (p. 605).

Edith Wharton repeatedly vindicates Justine's purity of motive and even despairs, "Was, there, then no hope of lifting one's individual life to a clearer height of conduct?" She even crusades for an "independence of judgement blent with strong human sympathy," from which the "liberating impulse" should come. Yet her moral precepts are unequivocally explicit. In the "dark forest" of life, where the "tangled and deep-rooted growth" of human relations confuse, "one must still grope one's way by the dim taper carried in long-dead hands," of tradition and ancient custom. Justine's act may be ideally, morally and theoretically laudable, yet it cannot be commended in practice, because, as Justine herself is humbled to accept,

Life is not a matter of abstract principle,  
but a succession of pitiful compromises with  
fate, of concessions to old tradition, old  
beliefs, old charities and frailties (p. 624).

Directly facing the glare of the relentless American society and the glimmer of private assertion, comes the grim little story of Ethan Frome (1911). Here is American life of a tougher substance than that of Fifth Avenue, life as tightly wedged in its snow-piled mountain valleys as the other drifts aimlessly. In such a setting the simplest notes fall sharply on a wintry silence which seems to be waiting



for unrelieved and fantastic tragedies like Ethan's. Yet Wharton's "purpose" and "theme" perplex critics of Ethan Frome. Lionel Trilling declared, ". . . Ethan Frome was a dead book, the product of mere will, of the cold hard literary will.

What is more, it seemed to me quite unavailable for any moral discourse. In the context of morality, there is nothing to say about Ethan Frome. It presents no moral issue at all."<sup>15</sup>

Irving Howe, E.K. Brown and Bernard De Voto likewise find no moral content in the book,<sup>16</sup> while Blake Nevius sees in the narrative a characteristic Wharton preoccupation, "the spectacle of a large and generous nature (Ethan) . . . trapped by circumstances ironically of its own devising into consanguinity with a meaner nature."<sup>17</sup> Two recent biographical interpretations look for the inherent meaning of the book in parallels with the author's personal life, in particular her love-affair with Fullerton, while she was Edward Wharton's wife, and her protracted psychological maturation.<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Ammons, in her more recent article on Ethan Frome, suggests that the book is a social criticism, a "fictive psychohistory" of conservative New England which simply describes how the New England

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<sup>15</sup>Lionel Trilling, "The Morality of Inertia," Great Moral Dilemmas, ed., Robert MacIver (New York: Harper & Bros., 1956) rpt. in Edith Wharton, TCV, p. 139.

<sup>16</sup>See Howe, "The Achievement of Edith Wharton" and Brown, "Edith Wharton," Ibid, pp. 5, 72; De Voto, "Introduction," Ethan Frome (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1946), pp. v-xviii.

<sup>17</sup>Blake Nevius, Edith Wharton, pp. 9-10.

<sup>18</sup>R.W.B. Lewis, Edith Wharton: A Biography, pp. 309-10; Cynthia Griffin Wolff, A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 159-84.

peasant society turns its vivacious, sensitive but unskilled women into "crippled, queer" females. "Witches do exist, and the culture creates them," is the moral of the "fairy tale," according to Ammons.<sup>19</sup> Yet no critic convincingly succeeds in explaining why Ethan Frome is so troubling, why it contains such tragic intensity, what exactly was Wharton's "purpose" by it, and what her theme actually "means."

Widely as the novellete differs from the cultural environment and temper of the rest of Mrs. Wharton's books, her presuppositions are essentially the same — a constituted social order of which each individual is a part, a civilization, a set code of conduct against which heroic individuals may rebel but will be grievously wounded in doing so. Percy Lubbock says, "There are no half-tones in such a life, and nothing for the writer to do — so it might seem, but to give with as few strokes as possible the huge monotony of the snow and the brief storm of Ethan's rebellion."<sup>20</sup>

Ethan's heroic possibilities, his technical training, his academic aspirations, his sensitivity to natural beauty and finer things of life are carefully characterized by Wharton. Added to these are his qualities of kindness, generosity and striking physical appearance — "like the bronze image of a hero" (p. 15). Ethan realised the "monstrousness

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<sup>19</sup>Elizabeth Ammons, "Edith Wharton's 'Ethan Frome' and the Question of Meaning," Studies in American Fiction, 7, No. 2 (Autumn 1979), 138.

<sup>20</sup>Percy Lubbock, "The Novels of Edith Wharton," The Quarterly Review (January 1915), rpt. in Edith Wharton, TCV, p. 54.

of useless sacrifices," and this encouraged his selfish, passionate bent; but this again was curbed by the puritanical assertion of conventional responsibility. The bitter futilities which imprison Ethan's existence, tighten their hold again faster than ever after his one assertive but vain effort to bring passion if not to life, at least to death. Not only is the gift of death denied to Ethan and Mattie, but they cannot even live in an undesecrated memory of their single contact with beauty. By the long anticlimax of their fate, memory itself is corroded; and it is the mean indignity of pain, not its sanctity, which is thrown upon Ethan's tragic powers of endurance.

With a warped and shortened right side, a heart torn with anguish and guilt, his each step "like the link of a chain" shackling him to Zeena, Ethan is but a ruin of a man! His attempt to escape his commitments to Zeena only double the bonds of his captivity. His crippled body objectifies the warped state of his soul, now chained to the ruins of a tragic marriage, and the searing guilt resulting from Mattie's state. As Mrs. Hale says, "Yes its pretty bad. And they ain't any of them easy people either. Mattie was before the accident; I never knew a sweeter nature. But she's suffered too much — that's what I always say when folks tell me how she's soured. And Zeena, she was always cranky . . . sometimes the two of them get going at each other and then Ethan's face'd break your heart . . . when I see that I think its him that suffers most . . ." (p. 179).

Ethan calls daily at the post office, dragging each painful step, seeking some sort of a connection with the outer world. But the fact that he never receives any communication increases his sense of hopelessness and tragic waste. At the end, a final savage twist lights up the whole future in a single lurid flash: the crippled Ethan with a heart heavy with anguish, his dreadful wife, Zeena, gathering a certain morbid strength from the suffering of others, vulture-like patiently attending the dying, and Mattie — the once ethereal being Ethan had loved, now bed-ridden and querulous with pain, her bright, youthful body and nymph-like face transformed into "a shapeless mass under which her body kept its limp immobility, and her dark eyes had the bright witch-like stare that disease of the spine sometimes gives" — all living out their death in the kitchen of the desolate, snow-covered Frome farm. This, then is the scene which lingers in the reader's memory — a death-in-life, a hell-on-earth, — a perpetuity of suffering memorializing a moment of passion! It is terrible and cruel, but it is the fate brought upon themselves by Ethan and Mattie through a wrong moral choice.

Professor Trilling contends that "only a moral judgement cruel to the point of insanity could speak of the tragic fate of Ethan and Mattie as anything but accidental."<sup>21</sup> But the story of Ethan actually gains stature from the refinement of

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<sup>21</sup>Lionel Trilling, "The Morality of Inertia," Edith Wharton, TCV, p. 145.

torture which Wharton inflicts on her characters. Equally remarkable is the restraint with which she has refrained from drawing conclusions or moralizing obtusely on her theme, giving rise thereby to controversial and varied speculations. The final lingering note of this beautifully sad story is one of despair, of avoidable physical and spiritual waste. Despite their harshness and ruthless indifference to passion, conventions are yet based on years of experience and time-honored codes of conduct. Man enters into social bonds wilfully and in a responsible way. Freedom from commitments therefore cannot grant lasting contentment. All that Ethan and Mattie gain out of their revolt against duty and convention are mere "inarticulate flashes" of joy with the dreading apprehension of "surprising a butterfly in the winter woods." Life for all three of them is a long nightmare, "an inverted fairy tale," with only sorrow and misery all around, where each breath is but a passing moment in one long wait for death:

The way they are now, I don't see there's much difference between the Fromes up at the farm and the Fromes down in the graveyard; 'cept that down there they're all quiet and the women have got to hold their tongues. (p. 179)

In the stark, desolate New England landscape, the only sounds that reverberate are those of the Frome gravestones mocking Ethan's desire for freedom and change,

"We never got away - how should you?" (p. 50).

However, ironically, it is the death-like life of the characters, the eternity of expiation that immortalizes the

classic which will continue to be "read and re-read with pleasure and instruction."<sup>22</sup>

In The Age of Innocence (1920), Mrs. Wharton's recoil from the postwar world is seen mainly in her choice of setting. It is apparent that she, like her hero Newland Archer, "cherished [his] old New York even when [he] smiled at it." Critics often contend that by choosing marriage and commitment over love and impulse, he had missed "the flower of life," and that the "worst of doing one's duty was that it apparently unfitted one for doing anything else."<sup>23</sup> It is alleged that Mrs. Wharton feels, and makes us feel, that the price one has to pay for morality and social conformity is high; that her "indictment of society far outweighs the defence,"<sup>24</sup> and that fundamentally, it is a theme representing the "waste of human and spiritual resources" which develops in this book. "What a waste!" Is this our spontaneous reaction on finishing the book? "Perhaps," says Louis Coxé, "All that wasted emotion, feeling, suffering. All that past blotted out by change and the nice detergent of the new generation. In a sense, America is waste, as Edith Wharton very well knew — wasteful

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<sup>22</sup>Dr. Kinnicut quoted by R.W.B. Lewis, Edith Wharton: A Biography, p. 310.

<sup>23</sup>Viola Hopkins, "The Ordering Style of 'The Age of Innocence,'" American Literature, 30 (November 1958), 354.

<sup>24</sup>Blake Nevius, Edith Wharton, p. 177.

of its past, that greatest of resources."<sup>25</sup> True enough, Edith Wharton is very conscious of the rich heritage of past traditions and Archer, the near rebel is subdued by May, the total conformist. Where a lesser novelist would have been content in merely showing the process by which an American with separatist tendencies is broken to harness and curb, Wharton adds a new dimension to the book by arriving at a solution of the ethical dilemma through a balance between individual morality and group convention.

Pledged to help her on behalf of his betrothed's family, and sharing his senior's view that Ellen should refrain from seeking a divorce, Archer dissuades her, "Our legislation favours divorce - our social customs don't: It may bear hard on the individual, it may be stupid and narrow and unjust - but one can't make over society."<sup>26</sup> To Ellen's agonised cry for freedom, "But my freedom, is that nothing?" Archer's answer is characteristically genteel New York, "Think of the newspapers!" and, "The individual, in such cases, is nearly always sacrificed to what is supposed to be the collective interest: people cling to any convention that keeps the family together - protects the children if there are any" (p. 88). These, ironically, are the arguments Ellen reiterates when, before his marriage to May, Archer's sympathy and attraction

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<sup>25</sup> Louis O. Coxe, "What Edith Wharton Saw in Innocence," The New Republic (June 27, 1955) rpt. in Edith Wharton, TCV, p. 160-61.

<sup>26</sup> Edith Wharton, The Age of Innocence (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1920), p. 88. Subsequent references to the book shall be incorporated in the text.

for Ellen have deepened to love and he asks her to divorce her husband to marry him. As stated earlier, she refuses, seeing in the proposal suggested, "a happiness bought by disloyalty and cruelty." This moral insight in Ellen is the instruction of her American sojourn and of her communion with Archer. She has learned from him, that "under the dullness there are things so fine and sensitive and delicate that even those I most cared for in my other life look cheap in comparison . . . ."

Even after Archer has married May, the temptations persist. He now sees a grand passion triumphing over hypocritical conventions — "You gave me my first glimpse of a real life, and at the same moment you asked me to go on with a sham one. Its beyond human enduring that's all" (p. 186). But endure they must, for Archer's and Ellen's is "a passion closer than bones," "a deeper nearness that a touch may sunder." Such a relationship is beyond the definitions of husband, wife and mistress. Archer hopes to indulge his superior tastes privately, without questioning the moral authority of his peers. But it is Ellen who, displaying a rare dignity of character, disillusions him once again, and compels him to endorse the obligations of marital responsibility:

The very good people didn't convince me.  
I felt they'd never been tempted. But you knew;  
you understood, you had felt the world outside  
tugging at one with all its golden hands — and  
yet you hated the things it asks of one;  
you hated happiness bought by disloyalty,  
cruelty and indifference. That was what I'd  
never known before — and its better than



Like Aeneas, and for comparable reasons, Archer leaves his Dido, the communal loyalty overriding any personal fulfillment.

Describing the "essential rightness of the moral choice" made by Arthur, Marilyn Lyde explains, "Nothing could be more fatal to an accurate understanding of this novel than the failure to see that Archer's adherence to convention at the end is a totally different thing from his adherence at the beginning."<sup>27</sup> She correctly feels that there is a progression of Archer's moral character through the course of the novel. When early in the book he had persuaded Ellen to give up the idea of divorcing her husband, he was merely acting as a spokesman for society's blind aversion of any disturbance in its elaborate system of taboos. But when he accepts the impossibility of escaping his responsibility to May, he has discovered the deeper significance of convention. The meaning he had unwittingly revealed to Ellen he now learns only after she has explained it to him in all its profundity. The difference is between blindly following the norms of conduct and observing them with full consciousness of their implications. Archer's decision therefore, is not the ignominious surrender to convention that critics have interpreted it to be, but a quietly heroic triumph over the demands of "self."

Edith Wharton never suggests that in their renunciation of each other, Newland and Ellen have condemned themselves to a life of unrewarding frustration. To conclude that

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<sup>27</sup> Marilyn Jones Lyde, Edith Wharton: Convention and Morality in the Work of a Novelist, p. 95.

Archer's life has had no meaning is to miss the very essence of Mrs. Wharton's book. The exquisite qualities of a generosity of spirit that makes it impossible for them to be happy at the cost of anyone else and the ingrained sense of duty to those whose lives are entwined with theirs make Archer's and Ellen's love a rare complex of body, mind and spirit. The price they pay for their fine sensibilities is the ultimate sacrifice of the "flower of life," which however, these very sensibilities had enabled them to glimpse. Their sacrifice may have been rewarded with nothing more than dignity of tragic loss, but there is somehow a finality and rightness about it, a knowledge that the only right decision has been made; for, in the end our impression of deep tragedy is relieved by a sense of spiritual victory.

His long years with May show Archer that his sacrifice alone could have saved their happiness — "He had been what was called a faithful husband, and when May had suddenly died, he had honestly mourned her. Their long years together had shown him that it did not so much matter if marriage was a dull duty, as long as it kept the dignity of a duty; lapsing from that it became a mere battle of ugly appetites. Looking about him, he honored his own past and mourned for it. After all, there was good in the old ways . . . ." — This, then, is Edith Wharton's theme — a tribute to her own age, this affirmation that under the "thick, smoky glass of convention," bloom the fine, fragile flowers of patient endurance and denial. To go against society is as vulgar as to dominate, one must suffer and smile. Newland Archer builds a secret

shrine in his heart around the image of Ellen, whence he derives strength to endure his uneventful but useful life, where civic and social duties are judiciously balanced.

The brief epilogue, an ideal vantage ground for Wharton, shows us Archer some years after his wife's death, recalling the course of his life. Standing now in bold relief is his response to the personal appeal of Roosevelt that, "if the stable's ever to be cleared out, men like you have got to lend a hand in the cleaning." Though his own contribution was little, "he had had high things to contemplate, great things to delight in, and one great man's friendship to be his strength and pride." He had been, in short, what people were beginning to call "a good citizen." Besides, Ellen and his regrets have become "a vision, faint and tenuous," his sacrifice "a choice justified by events," the possibility of sublime romance faded before the reality of a life "filled decently."<sup>28</sup>

At the end of The Age of Innocence, Mrs. Wharton puts into a striking perspective the true relevance of the struggle in morals and manners that Newland Archer has gone through. His son, Dallas is the updated version of an innocence that believes itself receptive to all experience. Confident of his knowledge, spontaneous in his enthusiasms, and self-assured without the rudiments of hesitation or reserve,

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<sup>28</sup>D.E.S. Maxwell, American Fiction: The Intellectual Background (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), p. 262.

Dallas belongs "body and soul" to the new generation. For him it would have been so simple: run away with Ellen Olenska and hang what people will say. Society is no longer outraged or scandalized at Dallas's desire to marry Fanny, Beaufort's "bastard" child. Times have changed and in this simpler and freer world of Dallas's young manhood, there are no occasions to exercise restraint or nourish passion — "What's the use of making mysteries?" he asks flippantly, "It only makes people want to nose 'em out." Archer does not blame Dallas. The boy is not insensitive or obtuse, but he has had the facility and self-confidence that comes of looking at fate, not as a master, but as an equal — "That's it — they feel equal to things — they know their way about." Archer muses, "thinking of his son as the spokesman of the new generation which had swept away all the old landmarks, sign-posts and danger-signals" (p. 272). Archer's innocence in thinking that his society would remain unchanged by "occasional raids on dissenters and back sliders by the Van der Luydens, come down in all their minatory splendour from Skuytercliff — to keep offenders in line,"<sup>29</sup> is dreadfully amusing and so is Dallas's innocence in proposing to remake the world and human nature — in thinking that to cast off one form of bondage means freedom.

An uninhibited product of his age, Dallas asks his father casually of the "affair" between him and the Countess —

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<sup>29</sup>Louis Coxé, "What Edith Wharton Saw in *Innocence*," Edith Wharton, TCV, p. 159.

"Come, own up, you and she were great pals, weren't you? Wasn't she most awfully lovely?" and Archer, quite unable to explain the impalpable communion he had shared with Ellen, replies evasively, "Lovely? I don't know. She was different" (p. 270). Like every son indifferent to the sensitivities of the previous generation he can see in the married life of his parents only a ludicrous lack of communication and inadvertently reveals that May had all along known how close Archer had come to leaving her for Ellen:

. . . But mother said — . . .

Your mother?

Yes: the day before she died . . . . She said she knew we were safe with you, and always would be; because once when she asked you to, you'd given up the thing you most wanted.

At length Newland said in a low voice: She never asked me.

No. I forgot. You never did ask each other anything, did you? And you never told each other anything. You just sat and watched each other and guessed at what was going on underneath. A deaf-and-dumb asylum, in fact! Well, I back your generation for knowing more about each other's private thoughts than we ever have time to find out about our own.

(p. 270)

For Dallas, it is just as simple — and ridiculous. What a knot of irony has been tightened in this little passage! Can Dallas or anyone like him understand the nature of feelings Archer has known? Have they the time? the imagination? the sensitivity? The depths of a buried life can mean nothing to one who cannot conceive beyond the surface. As Archer says to himself, "the thing one's so certain of in advance: can it ever make one's heart beat wildly?" (p. 269). But Archer does not express his doubts to his son. The subtle cultivation of affections, of nuances

of feeling which only an ordered society allows seems to the generation "a deaf and dumb asylum." Dallas and his contemporaries have a kindly contempt for such old fashioned, illiberal notions and would unhesitatingly throw down all the canons which a rigid society imposed upon its members. Archer conceding that there is "good in the new order" still despairs, "What was left of the little world he had grown up in, and whose standards had bent and bound him?"

At the very end, when Archer for the last time retreats from Ellen Olenska, we feel in his action the stirrings of Edith Wharton's moral precepts. Sitting on a bench outside his life-long love's house, considering it useless to visit her after a lapse of many years, Archer accepts the moral intangible as a satisfying reality. He had accepted and gained her as an elusive but necessary part of his spiritual existence. Meeting her now would transmute the illusion which he had lovingly built up over the years into a cold, harsh fact. Archer, therefore, once again obeys the moral imperatives of his class and time by remaining transfixed to his old memories with her, where an aura of enchantment and romance still lies suspended over the richness of the moments they had shared. It is an enchantment enhanced by the mists of distance, the magic of which would have been disturbed by the harsh fact of physical proximity. Had not Ellen herself whispered, "We're near each other only if we stay far from each other?" The fear lest that shadow of reality should lose its edge keeps him rooted to his seat, as the minutes succeed each other — "It's more real to me here than if I went up" (p. 274). That his love

spiritually and intangibly belonged to Ellen is the ultimate "reality."

Edith Wharton undoubtedly wishes to convey that if Dallas has achieved the freedom from convention where he considers Archer's renunciation of Ellen as a "vain frustration of wasted forces," he has also lost the ability to comprehend the responsibilities and traditions which dignified Archer's moral choice. Transfigured by tradition, human waste becomes spiritual wealth. Newland shows the relevance of his tradition by his recognition and acceptance of the essential rightness of the choice toward which it guided him. The suffering he prevents compensates for the suffering he undergoes. It is the principle of his heroism — and of his wife May's. Described in terms of radiance, purity and as a superficial being, it is only in Dallas's revelation that she is shown to have depths of inarticulate and passionate love that Newland never guessed existed. It approaches the grandeur of the tragic, symbolized not by May's pink and white opera costume, but by her torn and muddy wedding dress. "How rich in suffering and incommunicable love must have been her buried life!", Louis Coxe has written.<sup>30</sup> It is precisely because Newland, May and Ellen have chosen to bury their lives to preserve others', that they have transcended and so preserved their own lives — this is Edith Wharton's final message in this book.

To interpret Edith Wharton's work in terms of naturalistic dogma where "in the struggle for survival, the morally

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 160.

scrupulous individual has in effect disarmed himself"<sup>31</sup> and that in the flight for freedom, man is "mortgaged to defeat" is erroneous. Oedipus and Orestes too were destined to suffer but this neither freed them from personal responsibility nor were they exempted from a nemesis. What made their fate tragic was the flaw in their character, the moral error which elevated personal aspiration above every other commitment. The naturalist would follow the theory of man being a helpless product of heredity and environment to an extent where all idealism or aspiration is nullified. Moral or immoral norms would fail to have any relevance for him, and man he would regard as an amoral animal. The committed novelist employs naturalism only if it contributes to the representation of an ideal state of life, a universal truth. Most important, a naturalist would end on a note of despair and futility of life. Edith Wharton, in all her books clearly ends on a note of rewarding satisfaction accompanying a correct moral choice by her characters. The House of Mirth ends on a note of tragic dignity when Lily refuses to employ devious ways for self-enhancement, and opts for poverty and lifelessness instead. This one act of moral choice elevates a static life of no-choice; and despite the conditions of life which had conspired to keep Selden and Lily apart, the one moment of their highest spiritual fulfillment "had been saved whole out of the ruin of their lives." The "moment" which Justine can look back on with pride, is "not the moment of keenest personal happiness" but one when "the meaning of life began to come out

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<sup>31</sup>Blake Nevius, Edith Wharton, p. 55.



from the mists" (p. 633) — Edith Wharton's silent tribute to an act of challenge and heroism, where the means may be dubious, but the essential "goodness" of the end in sight was undeniable. Archer's spiritual satisfaction at "having done the right thing" follows his choice of duty over passion. No naturalist would ever admit the possibility of spiritual triumph: death and material defeat would be the scientific facts of the case, any spiritual or moral concepts are outside the pale of his ken.

Thus, Edith Wharton's strong faith in moral and spiritual values collided head on with any implications of naturalism and determinism there might be in her work. It was impossible for her to present any situation without regard to its moral significance, without "turning on that deep movement of the soul". She repeatedly expressed her notion that "a good subject . . . must contain in itself something that sheds a light on our moral experience"<sup>32</sup> and that it must first of all answer the normal reader's question, "What am I told this story for? What judgement of life does it contain for me?" A close analysis of her major and most representative works has shown us that the creed which governed Edith Wharton's philosophy and the destinies of her fictional characters was: the observance of set norms of conduct as the only means of self protection, "in a world where conventions are valued as expedients and compromise is the only path to such freedom as is possible."<sup>33</sup>

Edith Wharton was a writer haunted by the demons of war and modernism as they encircled her in life and literature.

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<sup>32</sup>Edith Wharton, The Writing of Fiction (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1925), pp. 28-29.

<sup>33</sup>Blake Nevius, Edith Wharton, p. 18

The first change in genteel America came in the "eighties" with "the big money-makers" and steel magnates of Pittsburgh. The materialistic aspirations of these classes undermined the entire fabric of social usage. Increasing importance was given to the superficial veneer of good manners. This attitude prepared the way for corruption and eventual disintegration of social convention in America. The dishonesties and evasions of concealed adultery as well as business "compromises" struck Edith Wharton as offensive and degrading. The world war further knocked the already tottering foundations completely and with it collapsed the last vestige of a standard in culture and ethics. Its place was taken by the "new New Yorks," whose reduction of all values — emotional, ethical, artistic — to questions of portable property was a consistent object of Wharton's scorn and satire. She would have nothing to do with them, yet in her most important books the "compromises" and "evasions" kept appearing both as agents of moral dissolution and also as possibilities for fresh achievement, which however needed to be kept sternly in check.

This check, however is very different from a rigid observance of Puritanical or conventional codes, for as Lyde corroborates, "Convention is something of a negative power, suggesting lack of independence and spontaneity, the letter of the law (followed) without the spirit . . . ." <sup>34</sup> Moral action is independent, spontaneous and involves readiness to

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<sup>34</sup> M. Lyde, Edith Wharton: Convention and Morality in the Work of a Novelist, p. 81.

sacrifice personal advantage to an ideal standard of conduct. It is, therefore, very different from blind acceptance of convention. Duty and morality should be obligatory not because they contribute to any practical or material results, but because by their very nature they represent the highest fulfillment of the human spirit. If the critic is to understand Wharton, he must begin by realizing that this is the key to all the apparent contradictions in her thought, the ultimate conclusion of her philosophy of life, and the foundation of her theory of fiction.

Critics like Parrington and Nevius argue that Wharton was incapable of accepting any change and had an inherent "dread for innovation" either in literary or in social values. This certainly is not true. She was no "Quaintsy Goysy, tiny, too dykily psychotic, crippled, creepish, fashionable, frigid . . ." <sup>35</sup> grande old dame. This is evidenced by her unfinished fragment, "Beatrice Palamato," <sup>36</sup> an "elegant" piece of pornography which proves that she could not only change with the times, but could also excel James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence and Alberto Moravia at their kind of writing, if she so desired. In fact, her major novels survey a world growing progressively more promiscuous, but "nobody who reads her books with any intelligence can possibly believe that

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<sup>35</sup> Norman Mailer quoted in Edith Wharton Omnibus, ed. Gore Vidal, (New York: Charles Scribner's & Sons, 1978), p. viii.

<sup>36</sup> See Appendix C, R.W.B. Lewis, Edith Wharton: A Biography, pp. 544-48.

she thinks promiscuity works."<sup>37</sup> Mrs. Wharton did not oppose progress at all; she opposed the notion that progress was possible without building on the achievements of the past — "It is like wanting to burn the barn down to get rid of the rats. Better to preserve the barn and let the rats go on living than to lose everything."<sup>38</sup> Corrupt as the "house of mirth" had been below the surface, it still bore a recognizable relation to the world preceding it. And the reason she cherished it was that it had preserved the ideal of decorum and paid lip service to traditional morality. This in itself was a kind of power for good, as well as a marker pointing to genuine moral value.

Thus in her major works of fiction Edith Wharton shows time and again that man definitely can and does assert his moral will. He chooses either to accept or to defy convention, and suffering inevitably follows an offence against the moral order of society. More precisely, it is an error in judgement rather than an offence (Ethan Frome), a failure to deduce the right course of action from the facts (The House of Mirth), or an inability to balance individual morality with social convention (The Fruit of the Tree). What the heart desires involves payment of a price and often of an exorbitant one. Every farthing has to be paid and there is

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<sup>37</sup>Edward Wagenknecht, Cavalcade of the American Novel (Calcutta: Oxford & IBH Publishing Co., 1969), p. 264.

<sup>38</sup>Lyde, Edith Wharton, p. 87.

always an austere kind of justice in the punishment meted out to the individual who either fails to act or acts against the tenets of accepted norms. He emerges from the throes of retribution, chastened by his lapses and convinced of the supremacy of authority — the authority which represents the accumulated experience of the race, its experimentation with cause and effect, all the while taking into account the human need for happiness and fulfillment. These traditions cannot be obliterated, because they are landmarks in society's continuous growth — this is Edith Wharton's firm belief. Marilyn Lyde aptly suggests that the constant skirmish between convention and morality highlights another important aspect in Edith Wharton's moral philosophy — "convention supplements morality in two ways — first, by providing a basis for contrast, a standard or norm, by which the divergences from the usual and typical may be underlined; second, by serving as a control or guide rope for keeping morality within the bounds of the familiar and away from mere eccentricity,"<sup>39</sup> and we may add, from error and consequent expiation.

Giving man the free choice to resist the pressures of society, Wharton yet made the intelligent individual choose either the accepted form of convention, or a higher loyalty to a personal moral conviction, thereby hardening one's faith in moral absolutes. Social convention, thus, had a

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid, p. 150.

universal value — a permanent value for those who were incapable of exercising reason or choice, and a temporary but significant value for those who used reason to avoid prejudice and error. Nevius succinctly describes Wharton as "constantly testing her limits, seeking to extend them here and there, discovering that they have more resiliency than she expected, but always finding an ultimate sanction for them at the point where they were originally fixed,"<sup>40</sup> for it was norms alone which in a decadent society could give any assurance of a basis in the past and a hope for preservation of human values in the future. Gannett states in Wharton's Souls Belated — "one may believe in them or not; but as long as they do rule the world, it is only by taking advantage of their protection that one can find a modus vivendi."<sup>41</sup>

Edith Wharton once wrote of George Eliot, whom she admired greatly:

[She] was a conservative artist. She felt no call to found a new school of morals. A deep reverence for the family ties, for the sanctities of tradition, the slowly acquired convictions and slowly formed precedents, is revealed in every page of her books . . . . All George Eliot's noblest characters shrink with a peculiar dread from any personal happiness acquired at the cost of the social organism; yet her own happiness was acquired at such a cost.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Nevius, Edith Wharton, p. 249.

<sup>41</sup>Lyde, Edith Wharton (quote from Edith Wharton's Work), p. 78.

<sup>42</sup>Edith Wharton's review of George Eliot quoted in R.W.B. Lewis, Edith Wharton, p. 108.

The words are unmistakably drawn from the depths of her own self-definition and self-appraisal, and best describe her moral trauma at her desertion of her husband and the ensuing divorce. They reveal as well her moral beliefs and sympathies.

In the end, it was the traditional, the classical and the Christian<sup>43</sup> view of life which triumphed in Wharton's thought and work. To the end, she maintained firmly that one who turns a blind eye to the beacon of institutions set up by experience of generations founders inevitably against the crags of challenging situations. What had been tested and tried by the touchstone of time demanded a degree of acquiescence, if not respect. A flagrant disregard by the up-coming youth of time-honoured convention, at times reeks of vandalism. Roots, in their own way fascinated Edith Wharton.

To put it in her own words:

When I was young, it used to seem to me that the group in which I grew up was like an empty vessel into which no new wine would ever again be poured. Now I see that one of its uses lay in preserving a few drops of an old vintage too rare to be savoured by a youthful palate; and I should like to atone for that unappreciativeness by trying to revive that faint fragrance.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>Though not believing in any faith, Wharton was sure that Christianity was man's only hope. Significant is the fact that she had chosen her requiem to be the hymn, "O Paradise, O Paradise."

<sup>44</sup>Edith Wharton quoted in Harvests of Change, ed. J. Martin (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1967), p. 266.

## A WISP IN THE WIND

I simply want to tell about life as it is. Every human life is intensely interesting. If the human being has ideals, the struggle and the attempt to realize those ideals, the going back on his own trail, the failure, the success, the reason for the individual failure, the individual success — all these things are interesting; interesting even when there are no ideals, where there is only the personal desire to survive, the fight to win, the stretching out of the fingers to grasp — these are things I want to write about — life as it is, the facts as they exist, the game as it is played!<sup>1</sup>

— Theodore Dreiser

It was indeed for a stark representation of the ideals, desires and struggles within the ordinary man that Dreiser invaded the ornately-curtained, antique-laden world of nineteenth-century genteel American literature. His strength and "crudeness," his honest "lustiness" and keen understanding of the essential urges and passions of men revolutionized the American classic novel. Stripping the lavish tapestry of their drawing-room world, crashing the glass-panes of their hothouse nurseries, he brought in sunshine, light and air, and above all, the tangy smell of the soil.

To the young writers of the early twentieth century, Dreiser became, in Mencken's phrase, "the Hindenburg of the novel," the monstrous beast who came trampling down on the

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<sup>1</sup>Theodore Dreiser, ". . . the game as it is played. . . ." New York Times, New York, N.Y., January 15, 1901, rpt. in The Stature of Theodore Dreiser, ed., Alfred Kazin and Charles Shapiro (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965), p. 59.



lies of gentility and Victorianism, of Puritanism and academicism, in the manner of a Gothic Vandal or a Primitive Barbarian. The professional reviewers were shocked by his realistic approach to life; they cried out against his "barbaric naturalism" and likened him to Zola at his most depraved. At the same time, he was applauded by younger writers like Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis as the leader of the generation, the symbol of freedom, the hero of youth, the honest "reporter" of American life in his times.

A widely-read author with so obviously an "anti-religious, anti-christian, immoral outlook" cannot be ignored by those committed to a moral interpretation of life. The love of detail with which he delineates the motivations, the deliberations and finally the moral choice and its consequences in the lives of his characters make him an ideal subject for this study. It is easy enough to show that Dreiser's pretensions to a scientific basis for his so-called philosophy is the most fictitious part of his fiction. His elaborate theory of "chemisms" in the blood as the determining source of conduct would make any competent psychologist or authority in physiological chemistry imagine he was reading in the more fantastic portions of the works of the brothers Grimm. As we shall see, his mechanism is inconsistent, his naturalism unqualified. His consistent forces are his dramatic vision of the urges of man and the importance he attaches to choice in life. His works have as their chief concern the struggle that goes on between "those content to be slowly put to death by custom" and those who defy it. However, those who

defy convention in pursuit of material goals inevitably fail in his fiction. In an illuminating study of this aspect of his characters, William L. Vance rightly says, "Given these characters making these choices in these given conditions, the consequences were inevitable. What made these characters what they are so that they choose as they do, what created these conditions, how did these separate lines of action come into fatal conjunction — in short, how did this event come to pass in defiance of justice or rational expectations? In all his books, Dreiser makes a massive attempt to discover and disclose the answer, not so much in sweeping formulae as through the thousand small details of feelings, actions, circumstances."<sup>2</sup>

Among the features of the growing urban America of his time, the vulnerable minds of young men and women were dazzled by the lure of opulent delight the cities offered. Blind to the chaotic and insecure world of physical fact, these dreaming men and women envisioned glorious futures for themselves and succumbed to the pathetic myth that by their own free will, they were choosing the most desirable opportunities. Dreiser's characters possess this national weakness to a large extent and come alive moving and acting and brooding with all the urge and hesitation, passion and fear, doubts and contradictions of fully real human beings.

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<sup>2</sup>William L. Vance, "Dreiserian Tragedy," Studies in the Novel, 4 (Spring 1972), 44.

Sister Carrie (1900), was Mrs. Doubleday's scorn and genteel America's disowned child, whom Dreiser never allowed to die. With careful nursing it rose to be America's powerful novel which remains unsurpassed where truth to life and delineation of facts is concerned. Carrie is a "lone figure in a tossing thoughtless sea" — Chicago, where she comes determined to achieve success, prosperity and above all, happiness, though she scarce presages the price she will have to pay for them. Carrie's experiences in Chicago and her later sufferings exhibit a rare depth of human nature which raise her above the status of a naturalistic marionette or a helpless puppet.<sup>3</sup> By making her a creature of force and instinct, and not of calculation, Dreiser also reveals the finer potentialities of her nature. Lured by the promise of luxury, comfort and freedom from want, the compromise with Drouet is irresistible for her. She must stray or stifle and Dreiser admires her not because she elects the former, but because the choice reveals a certain force, a certain will-power in her which refuses to be stifled. She was "unwilling to wait till a better thing would eventuate," Dreiser tells us, not because she has no moral scruples, but because of her past experiences and present despair. The erosion of her spirited hopes under the atmosphere of resignation and poverty in her sister's home as well as the pain inflicted on her in her attempt to

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<sup>3</sup>Randall Stewart, "Dreiser and the Naturalistic Heresy," Virginia Quarterly Review, 34 (1958), 100-116. Dreiser's protagonists are denied the status of "hero" by the author because they face no moral struggle. They are said to be mere "puppets of forces."

find an honest means of employment make her accept the first twenty dollars from Drouet, though not without hesitation and a twinge of conscience. Dreiser is quick to point it out —

There is nothing in this world more delightful than that middle state in which we mentally balance at times, possessed of the means, lured by desire, and yet deterred by conscience or want of decision. When Carrie began wandering around the store amid the fine displays, she was in this mood.<sup>4</sup>

This remark indicates a freedom of choice a strict naturalist would never sanction. In fact, for the benefit of the careful critic, Dreiser, in a famous long passage of the novel, asserts his firm belief in the power of man's choice in matters of destiny —

Among the forces which sweep and play throughout the universe, untutored man is but a wisp in the wind. Our civilisation is still in a middle stage, scarcely beast, in that it is no longer wholly guided by instinct; scarcely human, in that it is not yet wholly guided by reason. On the tiger no responsibility rests. We see him aligned by nature with the forces of life — he is born into their keeping and without thought he is protected. We see man far removed from the lairs of the jungles, his innate instincts dulled by too near an approach to free-will, his free-will not sufficiently developed to replace his instincts and afford him perfect guidance. He is becoming too wise to hearken always to instincts and desires; he is still too weak to always prevail against them. As a beast, the forces of life aligned him with them; as a man, he has not yet wholly learned to align himself with the forces. In this intermediate stage he wavers — neither drawn in harmony with nature by his instincts, nor yet wisely putting himself into harmony by his own free-will. He is even

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<sup>4</sup>Theodore Dreiser, Sister Carrie (Toronto: Rinehart & Co., 1957), p. 64. All subsequent references to the book shall be incorporated in the text.

as a wisp in the wind, moved by every breath of passion, acting now by his will and now by his instincts, erring with one, only to retrieve by the other, falling by one only to rise by the other — a creature of incalculable variability (pp. 70-71).

There is thus, no doubt about Dreiser's acceptance of the notion of free-will — the one factor which distinguishes man from the animal species and establishes his superiority in nature. This is further illustrated in the character and choice of Hurstwood.

The suave, gold-buttoned, leather-booted, immaculately dressed manager of the fashionable Fitzgerald's and Moys, has an attraction difficult for Carrie to resist. Impressed by his genteel manners, his expensive looks, the casual bon-ton with which "greenbacks" slip through his jewelled fingers, she at once sees him as the epitome of all her desires. Hurstwood, in turn pursues her for the thrill of a pretty young conquest. Carrie symbolizes for him all that is lacking in his plaid marriage with an unfeeling, money-hungry sophisticate, in his selfish children, in his routine existence and vanishing youth. He has the force and the desire to rebel, to reach out beyond the mores of his established existence. Life anew with Carrie is symbolic of this force in him, as well as of his opportunity to grasp life fully and intensely. His rebellion against society is rooted not so much in his passions as in his dissatisfaction with the social goals of money, renown, luxury and family life. To rebel against these, he opts for theft and elopement with Carrie, believing now in goals of love, enjoyment and true happiness.

Dreiser unlike Hardy does not parry the question of Hurstwood's decision to steal the money from his employers by merely showing the chance locking of the safe. With deliberation he dramatizes Hurstwood's hesitation, his confusion, the prolonged debate in his mind whether to take the amount or leave it. As Professor Mookerjee in his brilliant study on Dreiser remarks, "Just what these [perception of morals and conformity to them] are, Dreiser does not elaborate, but in his comments on Hurstwood's state of mind, he seems to be accepting the existence of something akin to absolute morality"<sup>5</sup>:

He puzzled as he thought of these things, then pushed in the drawers and closed the door, pausing with his hand upon the knob, which might so easily lock it all beyond temptation. Still he paused. Finally he went to the windows and pulled down the curtains . . . . He could get Carrie. Oh yes, he could! He could get rid of his wife . . . . He went back to the safe and put his hand on the knob. Then he pulled the door open and took the drawer with the money quite out . . . .

Lord what was that? For the first time he was tense, as if a stern hand had been laid upon his shoulder . . . (pp. 36-37).

Dreiser thus shows that in Hurstwood a struggle between the forces of good and evil ensued. He was definitely a moral agent in the shaping of a future course of life and not merely pulled by chance. He positively had knowledge of the wrongness of his act, he knew he could avoid it if he chose, and that it would inevitably bring him to grief — "He decided he would take them. Yes he would . . . and yet he wavered.

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<sup>5</sup>R.N. Mookerjee, Theodore Dreiser: His Thoughts and Social Criticism (Delhi: National Publishing House, 1974), p. 40.

For "At every first adventure into some untried evil, the mind wavers. The clock of thought ticks out its wish and its denial." He did not know "what" evil might result from it to him — how soon he might come to grief, but that he would, was definite. Even after the safe has been accidentally locked, Hurstwood "looked about him and decided instantly. There was no delaying now" (p. 239). Perhaps there was a way out, even then. He could return the money the following morning. But Hurstwood's intrinsic moral weakness prevents him from doing so. The automatic locking of the safe is certainly accidental, but Choice is the predominating factor in this incident. One can further argue that originally Hurstwood brings himself to be tempted and decides to take the money. His helplessness is brought about by his own weakness of character, his own infatuation with Carrie, and by his own moral choice to leave his position, family and respectability and begin life anew with Carrie.

As for Carrie, Hurstwood's sudden arrival and their consequent elopement is very much a surprise for her. Yet he offers her an open option — to get off the train and go back to Drouet or to accompany him to New York. Dreiser once again gives her the power to decide her future:

Carrie felt the train to be slowing down. It was the moment to act if she was to act at all . . . . Carrie hung in a quandary between decision and helplessness . . . and she was listening to his plea . . . . (p. 249).

Her motivations for this choice, of course deserve a study. Her realizations that Drouet would never do the one thing she most desired, that is, enter into a holy union

with her,<sup>6</sup> that when he grew tired of her, he would as unceremoniously discard her as he had "picked her up," that once again she would be resigned to spend the rest of her life in loneliness and poverty — lead her to accept Hurstwood's offer. Coupled with her tacit acceptance of a life foreign to the religious and moralistic teachings she had been nurtured on, is her interest in and attraction for Hurstwood. Her spirit is anxious for a better future, and she listens to his plea . . . .

Many Dreiserian critics believe that Carrie and Hurstwood impress as real human characters, because they are faceless victims tossed about in the winds of circumstances, but this hardly appears to be true. On the contrary, they appear alive and convincing because of the dramatic interplay of volition and circumstances, the very interplay of life itself. Hurstwood is brought to despair, destitution and even death,<sup>7</sup> not because of circumstances alone, but because he himself has chosen a destructive course of life. Carrie's desertion of him in the time of his greatest emotional need precipitates his doom. But Carrie's goals have also been clearly defined by Dreiser. She is not a ruthless, self-centred woman which

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<sup>6</sup>It is to be noted that when Dreiser says of Drouet, "He was referring to some property which he said he had and which required so much attention, adjustment and what not, that somehow or other it interfered with his free, moral, personal actions" (pp. 171-172), he is being clearly ironic about Drouet's contention that circumstances control his moral decisions.

<sup>7</sup>By showing suicide as the means of Hurstwood's end, Dreiser once again emphasizes the importance of free-will and moral choice.



she appears to be. Her aims in life are — material comfort, success and above all — the need to be loved and cherished, to be fulfilled and mastered. The precise fact which she cannot accept is Hurstwood's fall from grace, his niggardly suggestions that they may save a few cents by buying less meat or by buying it from a different butcher. This is opposite to the bon-vivant saloon manager whose epicurean magnanimity had so appealed to Carrie. The final blow comes in the form of Hurstwood's suggestion at exactly the fatal moment that they should move to a cheaper apartment. And this leads to Carrie's final choice — to leave Hurstwood in his pathetic state for what she considers vistas of vital, fuller and more satisfying experience. Drouet and Hurstwood represent to her not so much wealth or physical attraction as an appeal to something richer and more satisfying in her nature.

Contrary to the opinion of critics, the chief values of Carrie's world are not mere success and display, nor are physical pleasures its boundaries. Her feelings are not exclusively concerned with the material aspects of living, nor is her craving for pleasure the mainstay of her nature.<sup>8</sup> Neither, as Morgan says, is she innocently selfish for attention, status and luxury.<sup>9</sup> What Carrie strives for is simply a fuller life, which in the twentieth century, of course entails tangible material comforts and freedom from want.

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<sup>8</sup>Maxwell Geismar, Rebels and Ancestors: The American Novel, 1890-1915 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1953), p. 294.

<sup>9</sup>H. Wayne Morgan, American Writers in Rebellion (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965), pp. 157-158.

Dreiser himself explains — "Not evil, but longing for that which is better more often directs the steps of the erring. Not evil, but goodness more often allures the feeling mind unused to reason" (p. 556).

She is drawn to both Drouet and Hurstwood and, as subtly shown, to Ames, because each responds to some need in her which at the moment she finds unfulfilled. These three characters reflect the upward course of Carrie's inner development. Through her choice of life with each of these characters, she is shown to choose the upward ladder of experience. While objects of material comfort, clothes and finery essentially prompt her choice of life with Drouet, it is desire for respectability and a need to be loved which make her take up life with Hurstwood. Through her acceptance of tragic roles in drama at Ames' suggestion, she reaches an emotional intensity she innately possesses and can bring to life. This is further proved by the fact that she requires the extraordinary yet representative world of the theatre to embody her emotional depth and increasing fineness of temperament and taste. At the close of the book, we can be sure that this yearning for a fulness of life, her endeavour for the chiselling of her instincts and above all, her search for happiness shall continue. It is this quality of life in Sister Carrie, moving and acting, hesitating and contradicting and finally choosing one way of life over another that captures our attention and makes us aware of the importance Dreiser attaches to Choice in the novel.

Often rational moral choice is influenced by irrational pressures on the characters making it. It then achieves added ethical significance as the fates of other people are dependent on this choice. Jennie Gerhardt pointedly illustrates this. With her sweet smile, her virginal spirit in harmony with nature, her "non-defensive" warmth and generosity, Jennie proved to be a wilful "victim" of circumstances which ruin her fine nature and "marvellous potentiality." Feeling the responsibility of the utterly poor Gerhardt family on her tender shoulders, she seeks out to help. The added necessity of ten dollars to get her brother out of jail sends her unsuspectingly to Senator Brander's room. However, Dreiser does not make the scene of her seduction as completely fatalistic as Tess'. Nor is Senator Brander another Alec d' Urberville. Says Dreiser, "Conscience was not by any means dead in him. His sympathies if anything, were keener than ever . . . . One thing that disturbed him, however was the occasional thought, which he could not repress, that he was not doing right . . . . [Ethical overtones explicit]. He thought of these things occasionally and decided he could not stop."<sup>10</sup> Though fate strikes in the form of the imprisonment of Sebastian, and in the form of a dire need for ten dollars, yet Jennie's seduction is certainly willed by the Senator, contemptatively, wilfully and with the knowledge of the moral

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<sup>10</sup>Theodore Dreiser, Jennie Gerhardt (New York: Dell Publishing House, 1968), p. 54. Future references to the novel are to this edition and shall be given parenthetically in the text.

responsibilities such an act inevitably involves. Dreiser sensitively observes:

There are crises in all men's lives when they waver between the strict fulfilment of justice and duty and the great possibilities for personal happiness which another line of conduct seems to assure. And the dividing line is not always marked clear . . . . The opinion of the world brought up still another complication . . . . Meditating as to what he should do, he returned to his room . . . . He drew her to him, and then all the caution of years deserted him . . . (p. 84) (emphasis mine).

As for Jennie, in this particular event, her culpability is doubtful. She was "a mere bud of Nature — unawakened." Her transformation into a woman is largely a discovery for herself. Besides, the strength of what she thought love was with her, the support of patience and the ruling sweetness of sacrifice. It is only later that she alone suffers the consequences of not only her own, but of the Senator's moral transgressions.

Fate is important in that, it connives to introduce extenuating circumstances, but the final decision of his life is man's own. This is once again brought forth when Jennie is placed in another difficult position. The lack of resources brought about by her father's accident, the extreme poverty of the large family, the sudden interest of Lester in her — and once again Jennie is elected the sacrificial lamb. Yet Dreiser does not say that she was denied an alternative course, when Lester offers to take her away with him. The dilemma in her mind enhances the moral beauty of this apparently naturalistic novel:

What was this thing that she was doing? Was she allowing herself to slip into another wretched, unsanctified relationship . . . the sense of dominance on his part, that power of compulsion. She yielded, feeling all the time that she should not (pp. 142-143).

It is not, as Stuart Sherman thinks, that Jennie is simply waiting to "succumb to the first man who puts his arm around her," "who claps his paw upon her and says, "you belong to me," and in a perfectly cold-blooded interview proposes the terms on which he will set her up in New York as his mistress."<sup>11</sup> The agonizing mental crisis Jennie undergoes before making her choice indicates a fine understanding of human character and adds to the ethical significance of the book. Had she been reared in comfortable surroundings, unused to the exacting pressures of poverty and destitution, protected against the harsh experiences of life, sheltered in refinement, the practical terms of the proposal might have come as an outrageous shock to her sense of delicacy and refinement. But having grown up in the throes of hunger and poverty, hurled about by the ruthless leashes of fate, the practical details of Lester's terms inspire a trust and reliance in him and instil in Jennie a hope in the future for her and her family. Having a little daughter for whom she wants education, as also the enormous price she has had to pay for a ten dollar bill makes her cautious against future financial insecurity either for her sisters or for her daughter. The

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<sup>11</sup>Stuart Sherman, "The Barbaric Naturalism of Mr. Dreiser," The Nation (Dec. 2, 1915), rpt. in The Stature of Theodore Dreiser, p. 77.

feeling of failure of her own life after Senator Brander's death, the painful sense of lost honor, the knowledge that she will never be accepted as a legally wedded wife and a growing affection for Lester which nevertheless, includes a recognition of his needs for power, companionship and physical relationship, and some subliminal understanding of his need to avoid commitments — are the motives which lead her to opt for a moral compromise with Lester. In a tone ringing with heart-breaking resignation she announces: "I will" — ironically, the pious words of a sanctified ceremony, uttered unwittingly while entering into an ignominious relationship.

The sense of moral violation and attendant sorrow accompanying her decision, is further accentuated when Jennie is at once faced with another choice — to conceal or declare the identity of Vesta at the beginning of their relationship. Here Jennie's and Lester's characters are brilliantly portrayed as interacting to create Jennie's desire to conceal:

She knew that she ought to tell Lester about the child, but she shrank from the painful necessity . . . . What if he found out, never forgave her and turned her out — at present he looked anything but militant or like an avenging Nemesis . . . . "Well, have you washed all your sins away?" he inquired merrily. She smiled at the allusion. The touch of fact in it made it slightly piquant (p. 174).

The emphasis here should be noted on Jennie's election of this course, against the tenets of her religion and against the dictates of her conscience. She knows that she ought to tell Lester and yet refrains from doing it. These moral choices lead to guilt:

She had yielded on two occasions to the force of circumstances which might have been fought out differently. If only she had had more courage! . . . If she could only make up her mind to do the right (p. 239).

The "hero" Lester Kane, is also a morally responsible actor for good and evil forces are in constant struggle within his mind. He sure enough, "overcomes adverse social forces by wilful endeavour and himself becomes a force to be reckoned with."<sup>12</sup> In the brilliant delineation of Lester's moral choice, first of liason with Jennie, then of a decision never to marry her, and finally to abandon her, Dreiser not only shows his work to be morally significant, but also proves himself to be as sure a portrayer of human character as Henry James. The psychological workings of the human mind have seldom been as minutely observed as in the deliberations of Lester.

At thirty-six, past his first flush of youth, Lester still shied from responsibilities. Being the product of an affluent and genteel family, he had never learnt the meaning of commitments. The ideals of pure love, marriage and a perfectly moral life, had all passed with his youth. They had, however, not been substituted by different ideals — "Lester Kane was the natural product of a combination of elements — religious, commercial, social — modified by that pervading atmosphere of liberty in our national life which

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<sup>12</sup>Refer Randall Stewart, "Dreiser and the Naturalistic Heresy," Virginia Quarterly Review, 34 (1958), 100-116, where these are stated to be the prerequisites of a hero of morally significant fiction.

is productive of almost uncounted freedom of thought and action" (p. 138). Life had been generous to him and he would not wear any social shackles if it were possible to satisfy the needs of his heart and nature and still remain free and unfettered.

In a recent insight into Lester's character, Professor Mordecai Marcus explains that in addition to the above tendencies, Lester is an ambivalent, rootless and self-centred individual, not able to rid himself of his Oedipal fears:

He has grown up in a family where love is largely a matter of duty, and marriage is the pursuit of social safety. Lester does not want to commit himself to love because it demands a continual overcoming of Oedipal bonds and an unqualified giving of the self. Marriage and love in his family background are matters of duty and allowances for the play of sexuality.<sup>13</sup>

Dreiser's use of the words "crazy," "want" and "little girl" in Lester's relationship with Jennie indicates further his unwillingness to accept her as an individual capable of giving and receiving love. He therefore chooses to play safe. Life with Jennie absolves him of all responsibilities, and yet satisfies his needs for companionship, security and physical gratification.

When he learns of Vesta's existence, Lester assumes the dignity of a Puritan magistrate, while forgetting that Jennie's previous compromise with Brander had been little different from her position with him. That Lester forgets

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<sup>13</sup>Mordecai Marcus, "Loneliness, Death and Fulfillment in Jennie Gerhardt," Studies in American Fiction, 7, No. 1 (Spring 1979), 68-69.



this is quite natural, points out Dreiser, for, "the perversions of judgement to which the human mind, in its capacity of keeper of the honour of others seems permanently committed" are seldom justifiable. That Jennie had not given her love to him alone comes as an outrageous shock to Lester, who despite his own ambivalence towards it, believes in the ideal of the "one-man woman." He the "righteous," the "moral," the "pure of heart" is in the judgement seat and Jennie, before him, the criminal at bar, awaiting his verdict. With subtle irony Dreiser shows how it should be Lester who is casting the first stone at her. Lester finally declares his answer - Vesta cannot be explained to society and he can now hold no more than a "tentative relationship" with Jennie. The verdict shows the egoistical self-centredness and hypocritical morality implicit in such a choice. "It is a shame life could not be more decently organized," says Lester. How much had he himself contributed to the disorganization of both his and Jennie's life through his choice, seems to be Dreiser's mute indictment!

Lester lacks the courage either to accept Jennie as his lawfully wedded wife and face consequent social ostracism, or to abandon her totally, for she is now a "growing appetite" for him. Lester, as the cliché says, would like to have "best of both the worlds" — conjugal happiness yet no commitment, companionship yet no permanence, emotional security, yet no responsibility. Hamlet-like, he prefers not to take a decision unless compelled to. As Professor Marcus corroborates, it is his ambivalent attitude towards self, Jennie,

his family, society and its moral code, which prevents him from taking any definite action regarding marriage to Jennie. The discovery of the child is merely an unconscious excuse he uses, to avert marriage.<sup>14</sup> The question of his share in his father's property precipitates the crisis: "She was not a cheap, ambitious, climbing creature (self-seeking set like a man-trap in his way). She was a big woman and a good one. It would be a shame to throw her down" (p. 284) and:

If he did leave Jennie, he would not need to be begging for stock. If he didn't, he was flying in the face of his father's last will and testament . . . . He must abandon either Jennie or his prospects in life. What a dilemma! (p. 292).

Dreiser is sympathetic of his hero's plight — "Let us be just to Lester Kane . . . we live in an age in which the impact of materialized forces is well-nigh irresistible." He further explains that social prestige, renown and other such elements combine to produce what can be termed "a kaleidoscopic glitter, a dazzling and confusing phantasmagoria of life that wearies and stultifies the mental and moral nature" (p. 137). The dilemma proves even more difficult for Lester, because, as stated earlier, he ambivalently wants independence of society's restrictions and yet fears its judgement. He wants to assert his freedom from moral constraints yet lacks the courage to fly convention in its face. He loves Jennie in his own acquisitive, selfish way yet does not value her above social esteem and material benefit —

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 66-72.

"There was something in this woman, let the world think what it might . . . . Still a great world was calling him. The sound of its voice was in his ears. It had on occasion shown him its bared teeth. Did he really dare to hesitate?" (p. 357).

His wishes are given a form by Jennie herself — "She must leave him or he must leave her. Lester living on 10,000 a year! It seemed silly." Stuart Sherman once observed, "Mr. Dreiser's women generally have no individuality beyond their physique, their softness and their clothes."<sup>15</sup> Oscar Carghill supported his view by describing Jennie as being "without brains and with conveniently few emotions."<sup>16</sup> But here is a heroine who combines the gentility of a Tess with the grit of a Portia and the courage of a Hester. Her love is sublime and yet she is practical enough to realise the value of money for a son of an affluent business family. She willingly forsakes her happiness, security and love for his welfare. Though they arrive at a mutual decision to separate for good, there is a major difference in their motives — Lester is an ordinary man with self-advancement at the center of his consciousness, Jennie has only love at the core of her being. Lester is superficial, Jennie has a depth of understanding; Lester is unsure and idealistic, Jennie confident and practical; Jennie has the richness of character

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<sup>15</sup>Stuart Sherman, The Main Stream (New York: Kennikat Press, Inc., 1927), p. 142.

<sup>16</sup>Oscar Carghill, Intellectual America (New York: Macmillan, 1941), p. 114.

to forgive Lester his failure to accept her, Lester never basically forgives Jennie for her past; Jennie chooses this course for love, Lester chooses it for failure to love. Thus Lester's lack of assertion in this choice is his cardinal sin, his desertion of Jennie in violation of the dictates of his conscience his worst moral transgression.

The theme of moral choice is subtly taken up in The "Genius" as also in The Trilogy of Desire. In all these works, man's responsibility as a free moral agent is stressed. In The "Genius," Eugene Witla's entire life is a bitter conflict between the natural and the spiritual, between the animal in him that yearns for physical pleasure and the aspiring soul that longs for artistic fulfilment. It is in fact a conflict between the flesh and the spirit, the base and the noble. It can be externalized as the conflict between Angela and Suzanne in Witla's mind. His wife Angela can be said to embody the voice of conscience in him, while Suzanne may be said to symbolize his fiercely independent physical desire "possessed of hard, anarchic, unsocial thoughts." Angela tries to discipline Eugene as she herself has been disciplined by her religion and family. Eugene's choice of life with Suzanne shows his election of indulgence in passion, which not only leads to surfeit and death of passion itself, but prevents forever the fulfilment of his dream of art. Dreiser sympathises with the longings of his hero, understands his struggle to avoid moral commitments, but does not fail to assert that Eugene himself chooses his end, that choice and not chance determines destiny.

Dreiser, like Edith Wharton, is conscious of the fact that the individuals who compose society have each their own desires, their own yearnings, and their own strength to achieve their goals. One may seek security, another material well-being, yet another love, peace, artistic fulfillment, wealth or power. The strong ones forge ahead and assert their choice, while the weak in will submit to society. In The Financier and The Titan, there is a conflict in the ego of Frank Cowperwood, between aspiration and ambition, between the passion for beauty and the passion for power. Observing a lobster devour a squid — he receives his first lesson of practical life, and he elects the course of might is right. "That's the way it has to be I guess. Lobsters live on squids. Men live on lobsters and even on one another." He grows up having an uncanny knack for making money and regarding the world as a stock exchange. His fellow human beings are mere squids to him. The moral duty towards them, and their fundamental rights to honesty, democracy and loyalty are totally disregarded by this corruption-inducing, vote-corrupting, jury-bribing, non-ethical, non-moral buccaneer of American finance.

Cowperwood becomes a virtual Tamburlane. But just as one remembers not the cities that Tamburlane sacked but the character that drove him to conquest, similarly, it is not the various "misdeeds" or moral violations which Cowperwood commits, which are important, but the cupidity of his nature that leads him to elect this course of life. "I satisfy myself" is his only dictum. All his decisions are selfish

and cold — even those concerning his wife and mistress.

"But the necessity of making decisions about a mistress at all arose from the desire to satisfy a physical impulse, to indulge a passion"<sup>17</sup> — a passion which Cowperwood is as unable to master, as he is powerless to control the passion of power. As McAleer expressively says, "Cowperwood acts to procure a mistress much as he would set about acquiring a traction company, but for all these he accepts responsibility as a free agent."<sup>18</sup> Indifferent to all ethical norms and basic moral obligations, he relentlessly pursues his passion for beauty and his passion for power.

Dreiser is often accused of advocating Cowperwood's goals and actions but this is certainly not the case. Dreiser approves of him not because he rejects every moral principle that impedes his progress to the pinnacle of power, but because unlike Lester, he is a consistent, persevering man with a vital strength to throw off all inhibiting considerations and to assert his choice for a particular way of life.

It is said that Dreiser's tales of failure are his successes and An American Tragedy, in which failure is unalleviated, is his greatest success.<sup>19</sup> Dreiser's subjective pathos

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<sup>17</sup>William L. Vance, "Dreiserion Tragedy," Studies in the Novel, 4 (Spring 1972), 40.

<sup>18</sup>John J. McAleer, Theodore Dreiser: An Introduction and Interpretation (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1968), p. 107.

<sup>19</sup>Robert Penn Warren, "An American Tragedy," Yale Review, 52, No. 1 (Oct. 1962), 5.

and the sympathy of personal struggle is brilliantly delineated in this massive psychological novel. In an age when the Americans were either hopelessly fascinated or utterly disenchanted by the lure of materialistic success, this tragedy reached deep down into the wells of guilt, where moral convictions lay suspended, into a conscience where each one had been tried and convicted. In an interview after the novel's appearance in 1925, Dreiser said, "I have had many letters from people who wrote: 'Clyde Griffiths might have been me.'" <sup>20</sup> Thus, this tragedy assumed epic proportions and became the story not of one man alone, but of an entire nation.

Though Clyde's tragedy is brought about by the conjunction of environment, fate and free-will, yet he cannot be totally exonerated. The predisposing causes leading to his moral lapses therefore require a careful study. Dreiser purposely details the extreme poverty and empty idealism of the Griffiths, to emphasize their influence on the formative years of Clyde's life. This enhances the effect a promise of wealth and pleasure have on him. Hatred for the dire poverty of his parents (such as Dreiser himself had known), along with the adolescent urges and impulses typical to youths at his age, make Clyde susceptible to the follies that lead him to desire and destruction. A weakness for the

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<sup>20</sup> Dreiser quoted in F.O. Matthiessen, "Of Crime and Punishment," rpt. in The Stature of Theodore Dreiser, p. 206.

"No, I haven't Ma," he answers, ashamed of his falsehood, and suffering mingled self-commiseration and self-contempt. Yet he cannot think of losing Hortense. She seems to embody all pleasure for him, at the moment. But he cannot help thinking of himself as "low, really mean." Might he not, later be punished for a thing like this? (pp. 134-135).

The lack of responsibility Clyde reveals here anticipates the way he will act after the Kansas City accident and on hearing of Roberta's plight. At the same time, the moral deviousness he reveals by deciding to buy the coat opens the way to his later decision — to opt out of commitment and duty to others. The fate of Esta foreshadows the fate of Roberta.

While in his earlier novels, Dreiser's belief in free will and man's choice of destiny was explicitly portrayed, in An American Tragedy, it is shown more forcibly through subtle, ironic, prophetic incidents and actions throughout the novel. The automobile trip that Clyde takes with Hortense and his other friends, again in the hope of physical gratification from Hortense, establishes the elusive and unworthy nature of his goals. When the automobile trip suddenly ends with the death of a girl, not only are Clyde's dreams shattered, but he is shown crawling on all fours, away from the responsibility of his participation in crime. In this particular scene, through brilliant symbols, Dreiser in a single stroke depicts the entire life of Clyde:

Clyde . . . began crawling upon his hands and knees at first in the snow south, south and west, always towards some of those distant streets which, lamplit and faintly glowing, he saw to the southwest of him, and among which



presently, if he were not captured, he hoped to hide — to lose himself and so escape — if the fates were only kind — the misery and the punishment and the unending dissatisfaction and disappointment which now, most definitely, it all represented to him (p. 161).

Clyde's crawling on all fours is symbolic of his refusal to face responsibility as a man, and of his still being on an immature, animal level. The emphasis on south signifies the downward plunge which Clyde wilfully takes. The faintly glowing lights, of course, represent the illusory nature of success, wealth and pleasure to which Clyde is forever attracted. Among these he hopes to find peace — "to lose himself," and with the help of fate, escape the punishment and discontent which he knows shall be his lot. The motive of detailing this particular use of symbolism is to show how carefully Dreiser weaves the pattern of the destiny of his characters with the thread of free-will. Clyde's choice, here, to escape into freedom once again prefigures his ultimate choice to abandon Roberta and "to lose himself" in Sondra's wealth and affections. He thereby hopes to escape sorrow and anguish, which he knows would inevitably follow such a choice on his part.

In Lycurgus, where Clyde comes to work in his uncle's factory, his feeling of inferiority and his yearning for the glittering world of luxury and ostentation reach almost a feverish pitch. He comes in contact with Roberta, who is "intelligent," "pleasing," "spiritual," "gracefully proportioned," endowed with a kind of "self-reliant courage and determination which marked her at once as one possessed of

will and conviction to a degree" (p. 265). He soon gets emotionally involved with her. He waits impatiently to be included in the circle of his high-class relatives and so acquires the social skills of swimming, canoeing, riding etc. He had always dreamt of outlets for his passions in Lycurgus, but the "constricted morality" of the citizens disappoints him while fear of social ostracism makes him stifle under self-imposed prohibitions. However, being appointed as overseer of a large group of girls, his need for restraint becomes provocative and finds release in his decision to indulge his impulses — a decision which leads to the ultimate destruction of his dreams and to an unredeemed death for himself.

Though Roberta's religion and her conscience warn her against the involvement with Clyde, she is also "seized with the very virus of ambition and unrest" that afflicts him. He epitomizes for her the comfort, security and pleasure of high society. Added to this, she desires him in a "happy, honourable and commendable way." Their first date is made when Roberta tells a falsehood to avoid going to a church-service, a gesture that prophesies her break with religion and with the accepted mores of her community. Clyde and Roberta then contrive a weekend away from Lycurgus — a train journey — the consistent symbol of moral transgression in Dreiser, as also of the tension between conscience and desire, of movement from good to evil. (In Sister Carrie, Jennie Gerhardt, and now in An American Tragedy, the train has symbolized this movement in the minds of the protagonists).

The dance interlude leads fatefully to Roberta's total alienation from the restrictive moral environment that had erstwhile surrounded her. Her break with the Newtons makes her rebellion complete. She yields to Clyde, with full knowledge that she is "trifling with fire and perhaps social disgrace in the bargain" (p. 314); and with the belief that "it was too unconventional — too unmoral — bad" (p. 319).

Clyde also enters this unhallowed relationship with the knowledge that it was not legitimate, that consequences may be dangerous, that the relationship itself was evil. He is well aware that he is "establishing in some form a claim on her part to some consideration from him in the future which it might not be so easy for him to ignore." What makes the act even more base is Clyde's knowledge that "at the back of his mind there lurked something which even now assured him that he would never desire to marry her" (p. 324). Both Clyde and Roberta are never happy during the brief relationship, because at the back of their minds is the painful conviction that this is sin, and that it will eventually lead them to sorrow and penitence in some unknown, fearful way.

The introduction of Sondra in a limousine (once again the symbol of tension in the mind of Clyde) leads to a further crisis in the book. Sondra has no love for Clyde, her aims are shallow — to spite Gilbert and to flatter herself with Clyde's spontaneous devotion, so different from the practised courting of her circle. However to Clyde, she is symbolic of material welfare, luxury, sensual pleasures, and freedom

from want — "a star, a paragon of luxury and social supremacy" — in fact of all "that it is to want and not to have."

By chance, Clyde happens to go on a car ride (recurrence of this symbol denoting as the presence of moral dilemma) to Roberta's farm. The dilapidated and miserable house and her father's beaten and threadbare figure seem to typify everything that he most wanted to escape, now extending its "gloomy, poverty-stricken arms" to seize him once again.

The conflict between his loyalty and moral commitment to Roberta and the near attainment of his most cherished ideals through his growing contact with Sondra, reaches its climax when Roberta informs him of his plight and his duty to stand by her. Once again instead of manfully shouldering his self-inflicted responsibilities, Clyde weakly and irresponsibly decides to opt out of the situation and makes Roberta face the entire humiliation alone. Of this conflict, Randall Stewart says:

Dreiser's account of Clyde's quandary is a masterpiece of American realism. The talk with the druggist, the visit to the country doctor, his writing to Ratterer, his old K.C. pal . . . the whole social attitude towards the unmarried mother, Clyde's shallow infatuation with a girl of much less real worth than Roberta — all this adds up to what is perhaps the most convincing 'slice of life' to be found anywhere in the American novel.<sup>22</sup>

Failing in all his efforts to make Roberta see a way out, he even contemplates a mock marriage with her, but he is too weak a person to face the possibility of losing Sondra

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<sup>22</sup>Randall Stewart, "Dreiser and the Naturalistic Heresy," VQR, 34 (1958), 109.

and all that she represents. A chance reading of an "accident" at a lake where the girl was drowned and the man responsible for the "accident" never traced, unconsciously plants the seeds of crime in Clyde's mind. Much against his conscious wishes, the primordial self of his unconscious desires spells it out for him, "the devil's whisper," "the evil hint of an evil spirit":

Supposing that he and Roberta . . . were in a small boat somewhere, and it should capsize at the very time, say of this dreadful complication which was so harassing him? What an escape? What a relief from a gigantic and by now really destroying problem! . . . He must not even think of such a thing. It was wrong-wrong-terribly wrong. And yet, supposing — by accident, of course — such a thing as this did occur? That would be the end, then, wouldn't it of all his troubles in connection with Roberta? No more terror as to her — no more fear and heartache even as to Sondra. A noiseless, pathless, quarrelless solution of all his present difficulties and only joy before him forever (p. 476).

He tries hard to suppress these thoughts by calling them "terrible," "low," "vile" and "wrong," but the seeds are fixed and the efforts to root them out are not strong enough.

Death!

Murder!

The murder of Roberta!

Of that unborn bondage!

Freedom!

Entire, unmitigated joy!

These thoughts occur and recur with the deliberation of Hamlet and the persistence of Macbeth. Rest is denied him and his sleep murdered by "the very substance of some leering

and diabolic wish or wisdom, concealed in his own nature, and that, now abhorrent and yet compelling, leering and yet intriguing, friendly and yet cruel, offered him a choice between an evil which threatened to destroy him, and a second evil which, however it might disgust or sear or terrify, still provided for freedom and success and love" (p. 501). The recurrent 'yets' and 'ors' accentuate the alternatives of action, as Clyde is held in a paralysis of fear and fascination.

Perhaps nowhere in the entire range of fiction is the choice of an individual thus realistically and effectively portrayed. Wish and warning, compulsion and countersuggestion, evasion and tergiversation, rebellion and repression are brought into brilliant juxtaposition. The letters from both Roberta and Sondra in the same mail intensify the crisis and the urgency for a decision. Roberta — forcing him to social, artistic, material, passional and emotional assassination, by entering into a marriage which would make Sondra and all the dreams she represented — a mere recollection. Sondra — with all her beauty and charm — with all her contacts and possibilities offering him love and marriage. The difference between the attitudes of these two girls — Sondra offering all — asking nothing of him, Roberta, asking all. For Roberta to succeed, he must fail. She must fail if he is to succeed — Clyde is torn by the dilemma. At last, when he had almost attained the promised land of the American Dream, the "Paradise," he was faced with the threat of expulsion. Clyde's personality, forever torn between his moral upbringing with its emphasis on privation, and his

worldly aspirations with their emphasis on material pleasure, at last splits in schizoid disorder, with the rebellious voice of his "dark personality" striving to put to rout the conservatism of his "light personality."<sup>23</sup> It is this "dark personality" or his subconscious mind which assumes the form of the Efrit, the genie. His voice is the utterance of Clyde's own suppressed consciousness, stating with cold clarity what he has always been wanting to do, but lacking the courage to give his wishes a form. It is this genie, which like Marlowe's Mephistopheles urges Clyde to action. — and disaster.

Crystallizing his plan to murder Roberta, Clyde moves out of Lycurgus for a lake trip with her. Once again the symbol of the train emphasises the conflict between Clyde's innate morality and errant depravity. His anxious agitation, his indecision and determination are interspaced with parenthetical asides which reinforce the conflict.

On reaching the place of murder, Clyde hears the weird cry of the bird, which in his mind is associated with the idea of murder. Mr. Campbell suggests that with the moral conflict in Clyde's mind is also associated the conflict between America's hope and its illusions:— "Clyde's nature as an American dreamer clashes with his nature as a man," that is, the spiritual with the material. "It is this conflict" says he, "between Clyde's propensities as a man and his

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<sup>23</sup>The conflict between commitment to self and commitment to others, between "good" and "evil" is treated through psychological theory by McAleer in Theodore Dreiser, p. 138.

undeniable yearnings as an American which results in his tragedy."<sup>24</sup>

While in the boat, at the crucial moment, Clyde is still uncertain regarding the execution of his plan; a sudden paralysis overtakes him and he is even rendered unable to think:

At this cataclysmic moment, and in the face of the utmost, the most urgent need of action, a sudden palsy of the will — of courage — of hate or rage sufficient; and with Roberta from her seat in the stern of the boat gazing at his troubled and then suddenly distorted and fulgurous, yet weak and even unbalanced face — a face of a sudden, instead of angry, ferocious, demoniac — confused and all but meaningless in its registration of a balanced combat between fear and a harried, restless and yet self-repressed desire to do — to do — to do — a static between a powerful compulsion to do and yet not to do (p. 530).

Accident aids Clyde's desire and the boat capsizes while he unintentionally strikes Roberta and then rises to assist her. And while she screams for help, he is faced with his last and final choice:

This-this-is not this that which you have been thinking and wishing for this while — you in your great need? And behold! For despite your fear, your cowardice, this-this-has been done for you. An accident — an accident — an unintentional blow on your part is now saving you the labor of what you sought, and yet did not have the courage to do! But will you now and when you need not, since it is an accident, by going to her rescue, once more plunge yourself in the horror of that defeat and failure which has so tortured you and from which this now releases you? (pp. 531-532).

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<sup>24</sup>Charles L. Campbell, "An American Tragedy or Death in the Woods," Modern Fiction Studies, 15 (Summer 1969), 257.



Hesitation, a refusal to turn back and she sinks slowly among the water-lilies. The weird bird is heard anew. And once again Clyde flies south through the woods to what he considers freedom and escape. The ironic reiteration of the word "accident" only emphasizes Clyde's subconscious volition.

In a later self-analysis, Clyde realizes that he had not only chosen an evil end, but also strongly willed it. Hence, though in the nick of time, the deed itself was accomplished by chance, it may easily and definitely be regarded as a fruit of his subconscious volition. Further, he had chosen not to rescue her, an action though not legally, yet morally a crime.

Thus, Clyde's tragedy is the tragedy of the materialistic youth. It is representative of American consciousness in the twentieth century. It is Clyde's ambition for the false goals of the American Dream that lead to the end of his hopes and desires. He is neither entirely the Hardyian hero whom "gods kill for their sport," nor totally the Shakespearean protagonist for whom character alone is destiny. He is the Dreiserian modern everyman, a free-thinking individual, who knowingly, wilfully and responsibly chooses his fate.

Carrie, Jennie, Lester, Eugene, Clyde — all are individuals with potential and promise and tenacity of purpose as well as the strength to succeed, but their instincts and passions mislead them to a self-destructive moral choice.

Many critics have hailed Dreiser as the forerunner of American naturalistic revolution or a propounder of Amoral

Mechanism. Others have elected him to the dismal company of the apostles of despair. Dreiser, for his part, has not only taken a simple pride in this election, but also made speeches of acceptance, throughout his literary career. Yet he has not actually joined their group. He has seen life as a magnificent tragedy and has faith in man as an actor worthy of his role in it. Walcutt says, "Examined chronologically, his novels reveal naturalistic ideas struggling to find a structure by which [they] could move without turning upon crucial ethical choices. They also reveal a continuous ethical questioning of tradition, dogma, received morality, and social 'justice.' Thus they always contain an antithesis of their materialistic premises. Between the poles of this tension is Dreiser's "naturalism." It moves, during his literary career, through phases of objectivity, resignation, and protest toward the groping affirmation of spirit that presides over, and oddly defeats his final [naturalistic] work."<sup>25</sup>

For Dreiser, man is not merely a "wisp in the wind," "a waif amid forces," allowing them to move him like a puppet on a string, but is a "soldier of fortune," exercising his will and seeking to rise. Dreiser is indulgent towards Carrie and Jennie, sympathises with Clyde and Hurstwood, admires Eugene and Cowperwood because they have not been coerced into submission by society. They have all fought

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<sup>25</sup> Charles Walcutt, "Theodore Dreiser and the Divided Stream," rpt. in The Stature of Theodore Dreiser, ed., Alfred Kazin and C. Shapiro, p. 247.

against forces appearing to rule over their destinies and exercised their own volition — for better or for worse. The risk may have been great, their instincts errant — "a chaos of thought and passion, all confused," the consequences terrible, but what is noteworthy is their ambition to rise!

"What has a tragedy ever illuminated?" asks Dreiser, "unless it is the inscrutability of life and its forces and its accidents,"<sup>26</sup> and in each of his tragedies the poignance of destroyed lives is transmitted not only through the inscrutable forces of life (chance, accidental factors etc.), but primarily through man's needs and drives, "chemic compulsions" as Dreiser misleadingly terms them, through the illusions and feelings when they "overflow the vessels built to contain them": "I never can and never want to bring myself to the place where I can ignore the sensitive and seeking individual in his pitiful struggle with nature — with his enormous urges and pathetic equipment," Dreiser once remarked<sup>27</sup> — and this indeed is his concern and his theme in his major works.

We may term him a naturalist, only in the sense that in his fiction he does not present man as being necessarily the master of forces, or entirely a victim of forces beyond his control. It is man's own choice of a way of life, which brings about his fate, of course with the help of natural factors. Dreiser felt that man fails because while his instincts beckon one way, his reason decrees something else

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<sup>26</sup>Theodore Dreiser, Letters of Theodore Dreiser, ed. Robert H. Elias (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1959), p. 241.

<sup>27</sup>Interview with Dreiser, The Stature of Theodore Dreiser, p. 205.

and he disregards the latter. His instincts prompt man towards impulsive action while his reason reminds him of his commitments, of his integrity and of the norms of society. Dreiser felt that this vacillation between instinct and reason should finally yield to the sovereignty of reason. In this way, man, guided by his reason and "better judgement" will ultimately see truth and gain happiness. In fact as Granville Hicks perceptively explains, "Dreiser was Dreiser and not the exemplar of some theory. He was the lost bewildered man of the turn of the century, caught between science and faith, between city and town, between the economics of monopoly capitalism and the economics of small scale competition . . . ,<sup>28</sup> and we may add, between the illusory desires of man and the dictates of his reason. With the most painful honesty he set forth the dilemmas of his generation and, by stating what he knew about men, said something about MAN.

## PLUMES PLUMMET

Eliseo Vivas once remarked: What does it mean to understand a man? Does it not mean to discover some order, some underlying direction, some permanent tendency by reference to which we as observers are able to organize what we know of him. . . . And this is the reason we read Dreiser and read him with profit, because in spite of his chemisms, . . . we discover in his books insights about human beings we did not have before.<sup>1</sup>

Dreiser's insights about man do not corroborate his naturalistic theories, nor do they present man as utterly free and a-moral, for as Walcutt emphasized, "What happens in a piece of fiction must be probable, and probability includes the satisfaction, to some degree of the moral sense."<sup>2</sup> This satisfaction of the moral sense also involves the assertion that a character is the conscious architect of his own fate. In other words, this is in conformity with the Aristotelian concept that a tragedy, to be aesthetically satisfying and elevating, should appease the rational faculty of the readers. To suspend the operation of the Moral Law is to introduce the reign of caprice or blind Chance. An ideal tragic hero, therefore, should be "a man like ourselves" (ὅμοιος), in feelings and emotions, who wrecks his

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<sup>1</sup>Eliseo Vivas, "Dreiser, An Inconsistent Mechanist," The Stature of Theodore Dreiser, p. 242 (emphasis mine).

<sup>2</sup>Charles Walcutt, "Theodore Dreiser: The Wonder and Terror of Life," American Literary Naturalism: A Divided Stream (Minnesota: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1964), p. 192.

life, not through sheer coincidence or misfortune, but through a mastering passion or a grave moral error.<sup>3</sup>

Again, were we to believe that "chemic compulsions" explain man's triumphs and failures in life, we would get no inspiring or consoling meaning from the tragic spectacles Dreiser continually presents. His novels would then become bereft of any ideal value or splendour. In fact, they would fail to rise to the dignity of tragedies, and remain merely pathetic stories. But Sister Carrie, Jennie Gerhardt, The Trilogy of Desire, and An American Tragedy are certainly not pathetic stories. They are not only aesthetically satisfying, but also arouse a sense of catharsis and a sense of troubled wonder, which could certainly not be aroused by the futile antics of mechanical puppets. The explanation of this phenomenon is simply that Dreiser is not a naturalistic writer, nor is he amorally mechanistic. His feelings as an artist do not coincide with his feelings as a thinker. As Muller says, "He builds better than he knows."<sup>4</sup> Though his philosophic theories cramp his art, the moral artist breaks through these bonds — "The coachman is tipsy, the chariot drives home." Overtly calling man a "wisp in the wind," a "waif amid forces," he yet presents him in the grip of a moral struggle, in which he appears as a grandly compelling figure.

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<sup>3</sup>Aristotle, Poetics, trans. S.H. Butcher, pp. 316-317.

<sup>4</sup>Herbert J. Muller, Modern Fiction: A Study of Values (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1937), p. 207.

The succes de scandale of Sister Carrie made Dreiser's name a naughty word to a whole generation scarcely aware of the vicissitudes of the novel. As Carrie gradually progresses through her roles as her sister's boarder, as Drouet's mistress and as Hurstwood's alleged wife, there is an unmistakable moral decline in her character. Dreiser conveys her guilt, depression and loneliness with great artistic acumen, through action, monologue and symbols. As Drouet's mistress, alone in her rocking-chair, Carrie muses, "What is it I have lost?"<sup>5</sup> Another time, "She looked into the mirror and saw a prettier Carrie than she had seen before; she looked into her mind, a mirror prepared of her own and the world's opinion and saw a worse" (p. 87). Her conscience was not a Drouet, interested in praising. There she heard a different voice, with which she argued, pleaded, excused:

It was only an average little conscience, a thing which represented the world, her past environment, habit, convention in a confused way. With it the voice of the people was truly the voice of God . . . . [Surely, not the remark of an acclaimed amoralist.] Look at those who are good. How would they scorn to do what you have done. Look at the good girls; how will they draw away from such as you when they know you have been weak. You had not tried before you failed (p. 87) (emphasis mine).

Hurstwood's deception intensifies her depression. Though apparently she "prosperes," and each stage of her "progress" opens a freshly enticing vision of felicity,

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<sup>5</sup>Theodore Dreiser, Sister Carrie, p. 85. Subsequent references shall be incorporated in the text.

yet achievement is mingled with despair and frustration. Every satisfaction leads to a further dissatisfaction — "Alas she had dreamed a dream and it had not come true. All seemed to be seeking their own amusement, regardless of the possible sad consequences to others [tragic irony]. So much for the lessons of Hurstwood and Drouet" (p. 399).

It is indeed curious that critics who have complained most vehemently that Carrie not only lived in sin, but prospered through it, should have ignored the collapse of Hurstwood, the central and most intense episode in the novel. Often critics have shrugged this episode off as mere "concession to poetic justice."<sup>6</sup> What they have ignored is the slow, painful, tragic degeneration of Hurstwood, in which we perceive an unfaltering logic. From the successful manager of an elegant saloon with natural savoir-faire, the benefactor of city charities to the destitute outcast; from a being instinct with energy and ambition to a wretched, forlorn creature — every step of his long, downward course is illuminated and followed as though by a glaring searchlight by Dreiser. There is no overt word of preachment or any philosophical reflection here. The logic comes out clear to the reader — moral transgression in pursuit of false aims leads to drastic degeneration and death of all dreams. His sense of guilt is strong soon after his theft and elopement with Carrie:

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<sup>6</sup>Harlan Hatcher, Creating the Modern American Novel (New York: Russell & Russell, Inc. 1965), p. 45.



That sum or any other could never compensate for the state which he had thus foolishly doffed. It could not give him back his host of friends, his name, his house and family, nor Carrie as he had meant to have her . . . . The more he thought of it, the more unbearable it became (p. 250).

Financially broken, physically a ghost of his former self, wan and brow-beaten, mentally a nervous, hysterical wreck, haggling over meat, regarded with contempt by Carrie and finally deserted by her — he seems to suffer gravely in proportion to his crime. Says Dreiser:

No more weakly looking object ever strolled out into the spring sunshine than the once hale, lusty manager . . . . Some old garments had been given him — a cheap brown coat and misfit pair of trousers. Also some change and advice . . . . He was told to apply to the charities . . . (p. 419).

Hurstwood's being seen in increasingly darkened rooms, as compared to his earlier brightly lit environment, is said to reflect his dimmed moral lustre.<sup>7</sup> Dreiser's description of Hurstwood's slow, measured suicide in a cold, lightless room, shows the tragic ruin of a promising individual with great potentialities. The slow, black boat sailing away with his nameless body to the beggars' cemetery shows the classic stature which the inefficient and lowly sometimes attain, when dignified by pain. It is a silent warning to those, who lured by false illusions, opt for commitment to self over responsibility to those committed to them, and who tragically

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<sup>7</sup>Carl Van Doren, The American Novel (New York: Macmillan & Co., 1921), p. 260.

and wilfully violate moral codes in frenetic search of happiness, based on flimsy foundations.

Carrie's fate also illustrates the same belief of Dreiser. The rocking-chair symbol in the beginning and end of the novel reflects the moral stultification of Carrie. Though her intrinsic capabilities and finer instincts come to the fore with the various moral compromises, yet morally she has gained nothing. Material and mental gain does not ensure moral gain. She is still where she began in regard to morals, "out of the cradle, endlessly rocking" — always longing and wondering — "an illustration of the devious ways by which one who feels, rather than reasons may be led in the pursuit of beauty" (p. 452). It is not the end that is base, but the means:

Be allured, if you will by everything lovely,  
but draw not nigh unless by righteousness . . . .  
If honest labour be unremunerative and difficult  
to endure, if it be the long, long road which  
never reaches beauty, but wearies the feet and  
the heart, if the drag to follow beauty be such  
that one abandons the admired way, taking  
rather the despised path leading to her dreams  
quickly, who shall cast the first stone? (p. 451).

None other than your own conscience. Contentment shall be denied you, and peace shall never be yours — seems to be Dreiser's observation. Carrie attains all material and social ends she had ever wished for — wealth, gowns, carriages, friends, feasts, applause, publicity, loveliness, grace. Yet she is denied fulfillment — a fate worse than death. Death would mean the end to those searing longings in the heart. Life continues and the longings continue, and

she is left, ever aching, ever yearning, ever reaching out to grasp — and fulfillment forever eludes:

It is when the feet weary and hope seems vain that the heartaches and longings arise. Know then, that for you is neither surfeit nor content . . . . In your rocking-chair, by your window, dreaming shall you long, alone. In your rocking-chair by your window, shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel (pp. 453-454) (emphasis mine).

The negative note in "never feel" shows apparently the sense of denial, of discontent, of loneliness and lifelong unfulfillment. Money may provide temporary alleviation but material goods do not provide a fulfillment in the final scene of the novel. And the deeper appeals, the longings of the heart, are promises that die intestate. So much poignancy cannot be defined by the conclusions of mechanism. The sublime feelings of moral elevation are here keenly evoked and our moral sense is fully satisfied.

Charles Walcutt believes:

A thousand circumstances enfold man in their garment of steel, no one is capable of seeing the pattern according to which the garment is woven; one only feels the pressures which check or direct him in particular movements. Conventional moral standards constitute one part of this garment, they control Jennie's life and prevent her from achieving happiness.<sup>8</sup>

Jennie's first lapse from conventional standards inflicts a consciousness of guilt throughout her life. A woman as

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<sup>8</sup>Charles Walcutt, American Literary Naturalism: A Divided Stream, p. 197.

"artistic," as "fine," as "rich" of character as Jennie suffers disproportionately for her inability to do what is "right." Her poignant life is the outstanding fact of the novel upon which depend any ideas that the reader may gather. It is of course too hard that Jennie should suffer so, and the ethical system is to be deplored for making her suffer, but the institution of marriage cannot be rejected. It would however, detract from the pathos and beauty of the novel, if the writer was crusading for any social reform. The conditions of society remain inexorable and Jennie attains tragic intensity only because she is unable to rise above her impulses and needs — a woman as exceptional and as "potentially strong" as her.

A significant aspect of the novel is Dreiser's subtle perception of Lester's unwillingness to marry Jennie, i.e., to recognise her goodness and her worthiness of loyalty unto death. Jennie's desire to be "an honored wife and happy mother," to "have Lester and Vesta together,"<sup>9</sup> is a desire not only for social approval but also a desire which would guarantee her value to Lester and his love to her. It would moreover, make Lester acknowledge her existence as a person, an individual, a human being. Denied these, she exclaims, "I might have known that God would punish me for my unnatural conduct. I might have known" (p. 201). Vesta's innocent

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<sup>9</sup>Dreiser, Jennie Gerhardt, p. 218. Subsequent references to the book will be stated parenthetically in the text.

queries about her father pierce deeper the incisive dagger of self-reproach, plunged in Jennie's heart.

Lester's discovery of Vesta, his consequent decision to hold no more than a "tentative relationship" with Jennie is the fatal blow to her dreams. She realizes with horror the fruitlessness of her deception, the trouble and pain it had created in her "home," the months of suffering it had given her with Lester. A nature as devoted to him as Jennie's, as full of the understanding of love, to be thought of as that of "a practised cheat" by the object of her devotion — is a fact which evokes our deepest sense of pathos.

Their home life at Hyde Park seems idyllic to most critics, but what the critics fail to perceive is Jennie's anguish at Lester's refusal to give their relationship a permanence. Not only this, he refuses to commit himself to her or to accept her as one capable of lasting love. She is haunted by the constant fear that "life was loaning her something which would be taken away after a time" (p. 175). When Jennie reflects that to Lester's family, "she was a bad woman, a creature far beneath him socially, far beneath him mentally and morally, a creature of the streets" (p. 230), she is tragically aware that Lester is in agreement with his family. It is he indeed who is treating her as "a creature of the streets" by denying her equal status with himself. Dreiser did not mean this anguish of Jennie to go unnoticed — it was the anguish of a girl who lacked the courage to fight circumstances in the accepted way. The continuous ache of disgrace and defeat in her, the constant desire to "make herself

right with the world, to live honorably" (p. 229) is traceable throughout the novel.

As for Lester, he realizes that the entire relationship with Jennie had proved disastrous from the start:

The organization of society began to show itself to him as something based on possibly a spiritual . . . counterpart. He could not fly in the face of it . . . . . The people of his time believed that some particular form of social arrangement was necessary and unless he complied with that, he could as he saw, readily become a social outcast (p. 361).

The question of leaving Jennie accentuates his sense of guilt. True, he was now righting the moral cart he had upset by his liaison with Jennie, but in doing so, he was violating a higher morality — that which demanded his acceptance of Jennie and his standing by her. By leaving her for money, he was doing the most "ugly, brutal thing of his life." Jennie deserved better of him. "It was a shame to forsake her after all the devotion she had manifested. Truly she had played a finer part than he" (p. 361). He complicates this moral error by committing a spiritual error — that of marrying Mrs. Gerald and denying Jennie even the hope of his love. He further blocks his potential and finer individuality by a ruthless pursuit of social luxury and desperate hedonism. Material pleasures and social status, however, offer little solace. His feelings of dissatisfaction and doubt never leave him. To think that he had left Jennie "comfortably fixed" does not ease these feelings for . . . "money was not the point at issue with her. Affection was what she craved. Without it, she was like a rudderless boat on an endless sea,

and he knew she needed him, and he was ashamed to think that his charity had not outweighed his sense of self-preservation and his desire for material advantage" (p. 384).

Unlike Jennie, Lester's sorrow is not one of lacerated affection, of discarded and despised love, but of that "painful sense of unfairness which comes to one who knows that he is making a sacrifice of the virtues — kindness, loyalty, affection — to policy" (p. 356). His failing integrity is imaged by his increasing listlessness and slow self-destruction. His final meeting with Jennie rings with the note of sorrow and guilt — "It seems strange but you're the only woman I ever did love truly. We should never have parted" (p. 422). However, the dying confession gives himself and Jennie little comfort. It comes too late, when it can no longer repair the havoc it had wrought on both their lives. Jennie had already learnt that "His fortune was so much more important to him than anything she could be" (p. 361) and that he could have lived on ten thousand dollars a year if he had valued her devotion. Though she was somewhat relieved by his death-bed declaration of love for her, as also by the opportunity to be beside him in his last days, the prospect of a spiritual union with Lester is denied to Jennie. As Professor Marcus says, "Lester had had ample opportunity to act out the love he continually repressed and thereby to have left behind him a sense of spiritual union."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Mordecai Marcus, "Loneliness, Death and Fulfillment in 'Jennie Gerhardt,'" Studies in American Fiction, 7, No. 1 (Spring 1979), 68.

That his dying declaration had no such force is exhibited in the final chapter delineating Jennie's unfulfillment and her empty life. Vesta's death had already left "no light anywhere in the immense darkness of her existence" (p. 381). The final parting from Lester intensifies the gloom which stretches on, unrelieved before her. "He had been a part of her thought and feeling so long that it seemed now as though a part of herself had died" (p. 403).

Lester is as far removed from her in death as he was in life. That her separation from him is final and entire is symbolized by the fact that she can never visit his grave. The periodic visits to the graves of her father and Vesta offer her some mental satisfaction. Lester's body far removed from Chicago is more symbolic of love denied in entirety than that of love asserted in part. The adopted orphans promise little contentment:

They would marry and leave after a while, and then what? Days and days in endless reiteration, and then —? (p. 414)

The question mark, the last insignia on the novel — begins a whole new story. After all, was this question mark the goal for which she strove and yielded, for which she had struggled and which she had so patiently and so desperately sought?

Jennie loses, Lester loses and only Robert Kane, the conventional, practical man wins. Robert and the "society" which Jennie had defied. Dreiser's final verdict is not of protest, but of mute acquiescence. The ultimate defeat and



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emptiness of Jennie's life paint the silent moral — Man can no more defeat society than he can death.

The "Genius" — considered Dreiser's most controversial and autobiographical novel — was banned by the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, as obscene and sacrilegious. Stuart Sherman reduced the moral sense of the book to the lowest possible terms. But a perceptive reading shows that the novel reiterates Dreiser's belief that a fulfilled life is not one of revolt, but one led in accordance with the dictates of reason and in conformity with moral norms.

Witla's moral choice of materialistic business over his pursuit of art, and of passion over duty leads to a loss of happiness. The need and longing for pleasure remains forever insatiable — "The lure of beauty had never for one moment during all these years of upward mounting stilled." Witla realises how a life "badly arranged" can "distort the sense of colour, weaken that balanced judgement of character which is so essential to a normal interpretation of life, . . . take from art its most joyous conception, make life itself seem unimportant and death a relief."<sup>11</sup> The sense of balance, the instinct for colour, the joy of creativity — in fact his very dream of art is shattered forever — the worst fate an artist could bring upon himself. It is with a sense of sad

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<sup>11</sup>Dreiser, The "Genius" (New York: John Lane Co., 1923), p. 246. Subsequent references in the text are to this edition.

wisdom that Dreiser makes Witla say, "Desire was a thin reed to lean on; there could be no honest satisfaction in it."

Dreiser's faith in the institution of marriage as envisioned by society is further seen in Witla's return to his wife and to Christian Science. These are the only two courses which bring him back to his pursuit of art. During Angela's operation, Eugene watches trains and automobiles. The last moral tussle ensues in his mind, which finally leads to the choice of conscience over impulse, reason over instinct, and Angela posthumously emerges the winner. He recognises her at last as a "representative of some great creative force which gave her power at once to suffer greatly and to endure greatly." In doing so, unlike Carrie and Jennie, he achieves at least partial spiritual affinity with her. This fact is reflected by his declaration, "The marriage of true minds to which Shakespeare would admit no impediment, is of a different texture and has little sex in it" (p. 286). His ultimate faith in the generative and eternal force of spiritual love is reflected in his naming his daughter, Angela. The last scene of the novel silently bears testimony to Dreiser's affirmation of the same.

In a letter to Michael Gold, Dreiser said, "I pity the individual when he is weak, defeated . . . but I also cease to pity him when I find him strong and selfish, vain cruel or brutal . . . ." <sup>12</sup> And that was why Dreiser provided

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<sup>12</sup>Dreiser, Letter to Michael Gold (September 19, 1928), Letters of Theodore Dreiser, ed. Robert H. Elias (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1959), II, pp. 474-475.

an epilogue prophesying "sorrow, sorrow, sorrow" for Cowperwood. Cowperwood was to attain the pinnacle of success at the expense of others, but he was to be the "prince of a world of dreams whose reality was sorrow." The lobster and the squid might illustrate life, but lobsters did not always win. Most of the "world" had been acquired, so the sense of loss was equally great. Cowperwood's mad persistence for power and passion has as its prizes — the insanity of his father, the grief of his first wife, the distraught figure of Aileen's father and Aileen's own heart wrought with grief. Private tragedy could scarcely be more intense than that of Aileen's and Frank's, with the knowledge that he can no longer commit himself physically or mentally to her. The compulsion of living together is almost torturous to them. Besides, the burden of the past renders their present increasingly unbearable.

The break with Aileen disturbs Cowperwood even more than the knowledge that he has turned the whole citizenry of Chicago against himself — "He harbored . . . a kind of sorrow over the inevitable consequences of his own ungovernable disposition, the will to freedom within himself" (emphasis mine).

At the close of The Titan, we see the ruthless, ambitious Economic Man — alone in his great Italian palace, surrounded by servants but without friends or family. The Titan at the apex of his career finds refuge only in his court of orchids or in his priceless art gallery. Only in his inclination towards beauty — natural and spiritual, does hope exist that Cowperwood is not totally lost. Some

day, when he lets go his hold on materialism, he might find some comfort — not found in wealth, passion, success, or power, i.e. in base ideals, but promised in the mothering embrace of beauty and art — the accepted high ideals. The yearning for fulfillment continues — 'Nirvana! Nirvana! The ultimate, still, equation!' (p. 551).

In The Stoic, said to represent Dreiser's final philosophy of life, Vance perceives, and I think, quite correctly, a sense of transience obtruding on Cowperwood's consciousness.<sup>13</sup> An undercurrent of sorrow is felt in the fleetingness of the best moments. With the oncoming of his attacks of illness, he experiences an increasing desperation in the possibility that he will not have the years he counted on to complete his schemes. And neither is he granted those years. Nor is there a desired reconciliation with Aileen. The sense of wasted effort is heightened by the fact that his last wishes are not granted him. This reveals the futility of a life with only cupidity and rapacity as its chief means and power and pleasure as its chief ends. Cowperwood's fortunes are destroyed in legal machinations. Aileen is reduced to poverty, the hospital is never built, and his art collection is auctioned. His stately mansions stand bereft of their possessions. "He heapeth up riches . . . and cannot tell who shall gather them"<sup>14</sup> (p. 273). His own body is smuggled

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<sup>13</sup>William Vance, "Dreiserian Tragedy," Studies in the Novel (Spring 1972), 48.

<sup>14</sup>Dreiser, The Stoic (Cleveland World Publishing Co., 1947), p. 273. Subsequent references in the text are to this edition.

away and the funeral and burial services are a mere mockery. The shelter of religion Frank scorned in life is not granted to him even in death. He dies as it were, unredeemed. "We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out . . . mine age is even as nothing . . ." (p. 273) — seem to be Cowperwood's parting words to the followers of the American Dream, to those who barter their conscience for ambition.

It is characteristic of Dreiser to end his works with a shrug at the emptiness of materialistic achievement. His protagonists are left groping for happiness and fulfillment at the end. Cowperwood is no exception. Moreover, as was his usual practice, Dreiser in each of his novels illustrated the stages of quest through two characters — one desiring mere material illusions, and the other wanting something beyond — a Hurstwood and a Carrie, a Lester and a Jennie, a Eugene and an Angela, a Clyde and a McMillan, an Etta and a Solon — leaving one to pick up where the other left off. Berenice too conforms to this pattern. Untainted by crass materialism, she keeps her spiritual nature intact, and discovers the fulfillment of life, real happiness, and above all, peace for which all these characters including Cowperwood thirsted but could not approach, their moral unworthiness being the abyss. Berenice too had made a moral compromise with Cowperwood, but it was different from that of others, because she had made it for her mental satisfaction. She had sincerely believed it to be right, and had not acted for mere material gain or sensual pleasure. Her

final choice to pursue a life of spiritual knowledge and universal welfare is not a choice for herself alone, but involves the fate of many unfortunate men and women. She realizes that "her entire life . . . had been spent in the pursuit of pleasure and self-advancement," but she also realizes that "one must live for something outside of man's self, something that would tend to answer the needs of the many as opposed to the vanities and comforts of the few" (p. 306). In these words, she seems to sum up the essence of Dreiser's own philosophy as it finally emerged.

In An American Tragedy, Robert Penn Warren perceives a clear logic — "The transliteration of logic into a poetry of destiny is what accounts for our peculiar involvement in the story of Clyde." "What man, short of saint or sage," asks he, "does not understand, in some secret way . . . the story of Clyde and does not find it something deeper than a mere comment on the values of American culture?"<sup>15</sup> In a case such as this, tragic fear is heightened into awe, as we trace the growth of a mastering passion, which begins in a weakness and enlarges itself in its successive stages, till the first false step has issued in crime, and crime has engendered fresh crime.

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<sup>15</sup>Robert Penn Warren, "An American Tragedy," Yale Review (October 1962), 7.

Clyde's walking away from the scene of Roberta's death begins the story of the consequences of his crime. Dreiser, by making the break complete and sharp, emphasizes the thematic continuity of his novel. Like in Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt, we see in An American Tragedy also, a story of choice and consequences as a continuous theme, but in sharper focus. The intervening process disappears; the causal chain so unites the whole that the first error bears the weight of the tragic result.

The purpose of detailing the apprehension, arrest, trial and execution of Clyde has been diversely interpreted by various critics. Matthiessen believes it to be the portrayal of "an individual without any purposive will . . . caught by his own despair."<sup>16</sup> Charles Walcutt feels that the main aim of Book Three is to portray "a tragedy that depends upon the American social system."<sup>17</sup> Commager feels it to be "an extensive commentary on the social implication of determinism," that is, "men and women as poor creatures driven by chemical compulsions to act out their folly and fulfil their desires; to satisfy their mental and physical appetites."<sup>18</sup> Stewart too believes that the novel is a mere illustration of the dogmas of Naturalism, and Clyde is "merely pathetic rather

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<sup>16</sup>F.O. Matthiessen, "Of Crime and Punishment," The Stature of Theodore Dreiser, p. 215.

<sup>17</sup>Charles Walcutt, "Theodore Dreiser and the Divided Stream," Ibid., p. 263.

<sup>18</sup>Henry S. Commager, The American Mind (Yale Univ. Press, 1957), p. 114.

than tragic," because he has not "made a moral choice of the first magnitude."<sup>19</sup> Hoffman says the purpose of Book Three is merely to assert once again Dreiser's notion of amoral mechanism where "the landscape becomes assailant by forcing the individual to destroy in himself all vestiges of will,"<sup>20</sup> and that we are presented with a hero who understands neither what is being done to him, nor why he is doing it. However, he also adds that man himself collaborates in the crime that is his own death and "Like Dostoevsky, Dreiser is anxious to explore the extent to which the will of man has isolated itself from spiritual sanctions."<sup>21</sup> Professor Mookerjee feels that Dreiser's complaint is not against fate or the Gods, it is directed against a society (American society, to be precise), and its false and degrading values and unnatural restrictions. The importance and glamour attached to the false goals of luxury, prestige and wealth made criminals of men and Dreiser had merely decided to "fictionalize this man-made tragedy."<sup>22</sup>

What I feel to be the main thrust of Book Three involves a synthesis as well as an antithesis of these dissenting opinions. Dreiser sets about with the aim that the American

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<sup>19</sup>Randall Stewart, "Dreiser and the Naturalistic Heresy," VQR, 34 (1958), 113, 116.

<sup>20</sup>Frederick J. Hoffman, "The Scene of Violence: Dostoevsky and Dreiser," Modern Fiction Studies, 6, No. 2 (Summer 1960), 105.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 101.

<sup>22</sup>R.N. Mookerjee, Theodore Dreiser: His Thought and Social Criticism, p. 85.



values of this century are false goals for promising but weak-minded individuals. The need of "belonging" to a socially high class is well-nigh irresistible in a youth awed by luxury and denied it in his childhood, torn between his moral upbringing and his material desires, which demand a disregard of moral conventions. In this sense, the novel is a definite repudiation of the American Dream. The machinations of the lawyers and of those who violate norms surreptitiously is lucidly exposed by Dreiser. By showing that Mason shared an identical history with Clyde, but had now chosen to prosecute him for the same, as also the vile and low means through which justice is arrived at, Dreiser hints at an indictment of society. But the definite reason for discovering and condemning Clyde's private and public guilt has a larger and more humane purpose. When Clyde falls, he falls from the luminous threshold of material success, and through his fall, he rends asunder the heart of the American moral tradition. A youth as full of potentialities as Clyde at last realizes the insignificance and futility of the American values of success, and launches onto a belated search for new and more meaningful values of life. His death sentence nips the quest in the bud -- this is the American tragedy, not without the ethical overtones of Aristotle.

Clyde's infatuation with Sondra and his consequent desertion of Roberta haunts him with guilt. Dreiser never for a moment grants him true happiness -- "it caused him to feel that indeed he was a sly and a shameless and a cruel

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person who had taken undue advantage of a girl, who left to herself, would never have troubled with him."<sup>23</sup>

Dreiser does not absolve Roberta either for her moral trespass. She pays dearly, not only with her life but with every fragment of peace. To think that the one person she truly loved and trusted should not only desert her for another less worthy girl, but should leave her to endure alone the consequences of their combined sin, gives her endless hours of wretchedness and misery. The thought that "instead of being the emissary of a slowly and modestly improving social condition for all, might [she not] be looked upon as one who reduced it to a lower level still — its destroyer — was sufficient to depress and reduce her even more" (p. 373). The affectionate and complete understanding she had hitherto shared with her mother is suddenly shut off by an impermeable barrier, for "the conventions of this local world were much too strong — even where her mother was concerned" (p. 374). She is therefore compelled to bear the heavy burden of guilt alone.

Finally, Clyde's diabolic suggestion that she visit a doctor, the doctor's refusal to help her, Clyde's indifference to her suffering, the stigma of entering into an unhallowed relationship, the shame of unsanctioned motherhood, the sense of happiness lost forever and unalleviated, unmitigated sorrow ahead — these are feelings which give Roberta

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<sup>23</sup>Dreiser, An American Tragedy, p. 401. Subsequent references will be incorporated in the text.

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not a moment of peace. Her remaining life is one fraught with fear and anguish — a nemesis Dreiser relentlessly metes out to her.

Even after Roberta's death, Clyde's expectation of freedom is totally belied. He is now his own captive. Though Roberta has externally released him, she continues to pursue him with the persistence of Orestes' Furies, seeking to expose and punish him. Clyde himself is constantly seized by the fear of guilt and punishment, of being taken captive and never being able to attain his cherished ends — "he would never be able to shake it off — never, never, never" (p. 573). "He had never imagined that it was going to be like this, that he was going to suffer so . . . . And yet here he was, blanching at every accidental and unintended word!" (p. 581), the horrible, destructive secret forever gnawing at his vitals.

His misery is further enhanced by Clyde's own confusion as to the extent of his guilt:

True there was no doubt that he had plotted to kill Roberta there at first — a most dreadful thing as he now saw it . . . that lone spot — and then growing so weak and furious with himself because of his own incapacity to do evil; he had frightened her into rising and trying to come to him. And that in the first instance made it possible for her to be thus accidentally struck by him and so made him, in part at least, guilty of that blow — or did it? — a murderous, sinful blow in that sense . . . (pp. 845-846).

His act of not rushing to save her though legally a venial crime, yet when taken in connection with all that he had thought in regard to Roberta until then, was morally reprehensible.

The world of crime and retribution into which he is thrust to spend the rest of his days, is a kind of Dante's Inferno of mental ills where it may be written — "Abandon hope — ye who enter here." The sombreness, the obvious terror apparent in the faces of the condemned criminals, compelled "to think and wait" — marooned, islanded, living in a no-man's land of his own, each one awaiting helplessly his own doom! Dreiser purposefully details the sight of each one of them slowly being marched to the execution chamber to convey the sense of searing psychic terror experienced by Clyde, constantly having to witness these annihilating and impending tragedies. A time comes when he almost begins to long for instant death rather than being tortured to it, minute by minute.

The concluding phases of Clyde's ordeal compel him to grope for new values. Religion survives as the only solace. It is his orthodox, God fearing mother who alone offers him "sanctuary, sympathy, help perhaps — and that without criticism — in her heart," and Hope in a life beyond. In Rev. Mc Millan, Clyde sees the embodiment of the presence or "existence at least of some superhuman or supernatural personality or power that could and would aid him in some way . . . " (p. 851). Though critics are skeptical about it, I strongly feel that Clyde's confession of the truth to Mc Millan alone is due to a desire to present himself honestly to his Creator. He is almost convinced of his guilt:

"Wouldn't God — McMillan think so?" for,  
 "there was anger in the blow — hate — may be  
 — because of her determination to force him

to do what he did not wish to do and there might have been fear as to the consequences of such an evil deed . . . . I felt sorry a little but I was glad too; to be free, and yet frightened . . . and I didn't want to help her (p. 854) (emphasis mine).

Roberta's death, as we now see clearly, was not brought about by accidental factors alone — it was "a moral choice of the first magnitude" made by Clyde, wilfully, knowingly and with fear of consequences. In Prayer alone lies contrition and hope of salvation, but even prayer is denied Clyde — he just cannot pray. The Reverend fails in his appeal to the Governor, because

Before the Lord, he had sinned in many ways . . . he was little more than a compound of selfishness and unhallowed desire and fornication against the evil of which Paul had thundered — He had not repented . . . from the beginning to the end, bolstered it with false and evil pretenses . . . . Think as he would — and however much spiritually he desired to absolve him, was he not actually guilty? (p. 856).

Clyde's search for the absolute values of life has just begun when life itself is denied him. He realises the futility of material aspiration — "just things," which grant only the lowest form of satisfaction. Materialistic hungers, all too human and all too destructive are the lowest form of aspiration. Rising above these, aiming for spiritual horizons and realms beyond, Man can hope for peace and contentment. In this spark of Enlightenment, Clyde, realizing the waste his life has been, with a last, searing Faust-like cry for a drop of Christ's blood, pleads for pardon:

I know I plotted evil. Yes, yes, I know that. I confess. But must I really die now? Is there no help? Will you not help me, Lord? Will you not manifest yourself, as my mother says you will — for me? . . . . I will drive out all sinful thoughts. I will be different. Oh, yes. I will, if you will only spare me. Do not let me die now — so soon. Do not. I will pray. Yes, I will. Give me the strength to understand and believe — and pray. Oh, do! (p. 857).

But Faust-like, he too has bartered his soul for evil.

Seated in the electric chair, it is to McMillan that Clyde turns, seeking the courage for death and the hope of salvation. Such tragic intensity, such implicit faith in the balm of religion, a scene of such devout belief in goodness of soul could not have been pictured by one who was not himself a believer in God and in the worth of morals. It is, without exaggeration the canticle of a devout moralist. Clyde is not meant to die intestate. In a message to the world he regrets the significance attached to material benefits and warns against the snares which lead man to moral transgressions. It is "peace with the Lord" in one's own soul which alone should be the primary goal in life.

Thus, "the task is done, the victory won." An American Tragedy concludes, but the tragedy of the American youth in search of money and position continues. In a Souvenir, Mrs. Griffiths has Esta's little son Russell by her side in place of Clyde. The son is doomed to be lured to destruction as a result of repeating the same mistakes in his passionate hunger for pleasure and success. As Robert Forrey suggests, this is symbolized by the ice-cream cone as the first object of desire and a wealthy, young woman as the last. Deciding

to be more lenient with her grandson, after Clyde's execution, "she can think of nothing better to give him by way of concession to his appetite for life, than an ice-cream cone!"<sup>24</sup>

And An American Tragedy begins de-nouveau.

Harlan Hatcher rightly says:

The best of Theodore Dreiser is in this book. It is an epic of one important aspect of American life, its crass materialism, its indifference to all that is not glitter and show, its irresponsibility for the youth, its condemnations instead of understanding, its thirst for punishment instead of prevention, its hypocrisy, its ruthless savagery, and the ferocity of its mobs and courts of prosecution. There is less naturalistic detachment and more of the fire and the brooding pity for men who live with such impoverished ideals.<sup>25</sup>

Few writers could have pictured the disastrous consequences of errors committed in search of these "impoverished ideals" more honestly and movingly than Dreiser. Hurstwood wasting away in a charity house because his character collapsed through larceny, deception and disregard of duty to his family; Carrie, Lester and Jennie live through their lives yearning for fulfillment — all this because of personal immorality. Frank Cowperwood goes to prison for his turpitude in seducing Aileen and embezzling 60,000 dollars from the city treasury. His pathetic end is not unmerited. With prompt severity, the State punishes Clyde for his weak-kneed

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<sup>24</sup> Robert Forrey, "Theodore Dreiser: Oedipus Redivivus," Modern Fiction Studies, 23 (Autumn 1977), 353.

<sup>25</sup> Harlan Hatcher, Creating the Modern American Novel, p. 55.

murder of Roberta. The peace of religion and hope in the immortality of the soul is denied him.

Dreiser's line of thought therefore, seems to be that though impulses must be gratified, yet a price must be paid for choosing an enchantment whose very nature is illusory and temporal, whose durability is questionable and whose loss is inevitable. However, Dreiser displays a curious ambivalence in his work. Robert Elias commenting on this trait of his, said, "arguing in the role of a determinist on one hand that men are helpless, and assuming in the role of a social reformer on the other hand that men can act and choose, he appears to have been the victim of contradictions that any high-school graduate should know how to avoid."<sup>26</sup> Overtly, he seemed to recommend the pagan impulses or instinctual drives of his characters, but he also made them suffer severely for their wrong moral choices. While his novels are colored by the terms of Darwinian and Spencerian philosophy, he had "never read a line of Zola,"<sup>27</sup> the literary champion of determinism. The "chemisms" as human drives are called may blindly be allowed to "collide," but such blind collision does not induce or abolish the suffering of its "victims." Nor would it generate the sense of failure and non-fulfillment felt by Carrie, Jennie, Eugene, Frank and

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<sup>26</sup>Robert Elias quoted by Mookerjee, Theodore Dreiser: His Thought and Social Criticism, Preface.

<sup>27</sup>Dreiser, Letter to Mencken, 1916, Letters, I, p. 215.



Clyde. It is here that we discover Dreiser, the moralist. His stories are stories of aspiration and moral violation in pursuit of those aspirations. They are the stories of people who aim above their limits — people who in trying to get somewhere, get nowhere. It is the individual himself — his motives, his desires, and his own action, of course with marginal intervention of Fate (as in the sudden locking of the safe and in the overturning of the boat) which bring about his pathetic condition. Chemical actions, naturalistic forces or mechanistic determinism play absolutely a negligible part.

Man in Dreiser, therefore appears a free-thinking, responsible individual who experiences a moral struggle and chooses a particular destiny due to some weakness in character or some "grave moral error." Dreiser's protagonist can thus be seen as the ideal tragic hero/heroine of Aristotle and not as the "mechanical puppet" of Stewart or the "instinctual animal" of Sherman.

It may seem rather incongruous to search for the Aristotelian ethical concept of character from writers of the twentieth century, yet we do obtain from Dreiser's works a definite notion of the moral dignity of man. Hurstwood retains his dignity through his suicide by not bearing his fate passively, Clyde shows a rare integrity by realizing his moral and fatal error and also by having the honesty of his convictions. Through all Dreiser's works are apparent his insights about man, "the permanent tendency" to be led

to doom through a wrong moral choice. This is the "order we discover," the underlying direction of his works.

Vivas once defined morality as "a technique of control, a means of keeping in check those men whose powerful and strong drives would wreck the balance struck by the group."<sup>28</sup> Granted this, one has to accept that the ties with society are integral and internal and cannot be disregarded by its members. And the morality in reference to a society is the permissible manner of activity for the individuals comprising it. Interdependences have to exist and therefore rules of behaviour have to be followed. Men cannot live in utter and complete chaos. Nor can man disregard ties, duties and commitments for self-advancement and personal pleasure.

Nor are we free . . . from loyalties, sympathies and deep-rooted commitments to value. Factors such as these, bonds, ties, forces, deep interconnections are always found. And they make up society as much as the will of the strong and the yielding of the weak. And they do so in Dreiser's pictures as much as they do in actuality.<sup>29</sup>

This is to say that Sophocles and Aristotle, in their vast experience had cut straight to the centre of the human problem and propounded a solution, which based on essential human nature has remained the same to this day — an unassailable solution which gives meaning to every individual act: The Acceptance of the Moral Law. To act according to the set codes of society and one's own conscience — alone offers

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<sup>28</sup>Eliseo Vivas, "Dreiser, An Inconsistent Mechanist," The Stature of Theodore Dreiser, p. 240.

any satisfaction or happiness in life. This is the universal truth which from the fables of Aesop to our own day holds good for all men at every time. Dreiser duly asserted his faith in the Moral Law which uncompromisingly governs the life of man, making for an order which is divine, in the face of a chaos intrinsically evil; and in the fact that men are fully, if tragically responsible for the consequences of their acts, whatever their motives or compulsions. In a long passage, he reflectively observed:

The laws governing our social life are not so clearly understood as to permit of a clear generalization. Still, the opinions, pleas and judgements of society serve as boundaries, which are none the less real for being intangible. When men or women err — i.e., pass out from the sphere in which they are accustomed to move — it is not as if the bird had intruded itself into the water, or the wild animal into the haunts of man. Annihilation is not the immediate result. People may do no more than elevate their eyebrows in astonishment, laugh sarcastically, lift up their hands in protest. And yet so well defined is the sphere of social activity that he who departs from it is doomed. Born and bred in this environment, the individual is practically unfitted for any other state. He is like a bird accustomed to a certain density of atmosphere, and which cannot live comfortably at either higher or lower level.<sup>30</sup>

It is significant here to mention Dreiser's last two works The Stoic and The Bulwark. These "curious endings" for that "defiant pagan writer" are especially important because they are evidence of Dreiser's ultimate belief that moral solace is the only solace for "frail, restless, hungry

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<sup>30</sup>Dreiser, Jennie Gerhardt, pp. 236-237.

human need." When Carrie Meeber scaled the heights of her modest ambitions, Dreiser was there to insist that success had not brought her happiness. When Jennie at last lived "free from want" with Lester's last declaration of love and her two orphans as her prizes, Dreiser was there to emphasize her still unfulfilled existence. When Clyde let his dreams entangle him in mortal complications, Dreiser was there to assert the illusory nature of his goals. And Dreiser assured us that Lester, Hurstwood, Eugene, Witla, all turn from American materialism, disgusted, desperate and destroyed. Cowperwood had been no exception. On a vaster scale, and to a greater extent of success, he had pursued the same material goals, but with greater élan and perseverance. But the futility of his ambitions, the lack of tranquillity and the unfulfilled spirit at the time of death, the sense of wasted efforts, of "what could have been" are not without effect on readers. And as stated earlier, Berenice lives on to show the correct way life should be lived, for Dreiser believed that "Art should show not only the concentrated filth at the bottom, but the wonder and mystery of the ideals at the top."<sup>31</sup>

These "ideals" as Berenice understands them are desirelessness and non-attachment — the essence of our "song of experience" — The Bhagwad Gita. "No human being can give up action altogether, but he who gives up the fruits of action is said to be non-attached" (p. 291). The cause for

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<sup>31</sup>Dreiser, New York Evening Sun (September 28, 1912), quoted by Robert H. Elias, Theodore Dreiser: Apostle of Nature (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1948), p. 171.

Cowperwood's tragic life, as well as the significance of selfless dedication to others is now apparent to Berenice. Armed with this knowledge she returns from India, desirous of living for the welfare of others, and alone among Dreiser's heroines, achieves spiritual satisfaction. Dreiser himself seemed to accept this idea, for all his novels show as their ideal the dictum of the Gita:

Abandoning all desires, what  
Man moves free from longing,  
Without self-interest and egotism  
He goes to peace.

(Chapter II, line 71)<sup>32</sup>

In his last work, The Bulwark, Solon Barnes is just such a man. In this novel too, as in his earlier ones, it is the same conflict between the lure of material possessions and the yearning for spiritual satisfaction. Dreiser, who was at times fascinated by materialism and then repelled by its degrading effects upon human life, portrays this conflict through three generations of a Quaker family. Whereas his children choosing a life of sheer materialism, gain nothing by way of real achievement, Solon Barnes finds peace in religion and in the "Creative Force" and is convinced that "God talks directly to man. When His help is needed and man asks Him for it, He does not fail."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Bhagwad Gita, trans. Franklin Edgerton (Harvard University Press, 1944), . . . Chapter II, line 71. In his personal library, Dreiser had a copy of the Bhagwad-Gita, with annotations and marginal comments.

<sup>33</sup>Dreiser, The Bulwark (Garden City: Doubleday, 1946), pp. 333-334. Subsequent references in the text are to this edition.

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In the land of salesmanship and instalment buying, where pursuit of temptations and "unbridled pleasures" led its typical human products only to the electric chair, Solon is an exception. Through his preference of "simpler realms where profits are comparatively small and the troubled face of ethics was not so plainly visible" (p. 112), he finds satisfaction and peace. And perhaps that "good intent" which he establishes as the method of his salvation on earth, is indeed a universal language and the only one which can grant any measure of fulfillment to man.

"Men must be honest with God and with themselves" are his last thoughts — a further abjuration of materialism and a further propagation of moral values. That Solon also rejects religious formalism shows that Dreiser was against narrow dogmatism and not against religion itself. Solon, alone among Dreiser's heroes is fortified by faith when death comes. His last query to mankind is — "If thee does not turn to the Inner Light, where will thee go?" and one believes in his ultimate triumph, whether or not one ~~believes~~ in the Inner Light.

In the last scene of the novel, when Etta weeps over her father's grave, she is asked by Orville why she should be so overcome by their father's death. Etta answers, "I am not crying for myself, or for father — I am crying for life!" (p. 245), and this seems to be Dreiser's own reply — the prominent note which through all his work, through fifty years of changing philosophies and unnerving ambivalences remained the sum of his dramatic vision. The faith in Solon's

"Inner Light" and the belief in Berenice's "something beyond passion" were Dreiser's own, when on the last Good Friday of his life, he received Communion in a Protestant Church, reconciling whatever contradictions there were in a mind that felt life more deeply perhaps than any other in his time.

In a recent study, William Phillips suggestively traces the spiritual journey of Dreiser's characters through the symbol of water in his novels. Water is first the turbulent sea of society (Sister Carrie), then the lake of temptation and private guilt (An American Tragedy) and finally the still stream of the Inner Light (The Bulwark),<sup>34</sup> Dreiser's relentless quest for the meaning of life had also followed this journey and had reached, confident and reinforced, to religion and morality.

Man for Dreiser is an errant individual. He is not totally evil, but is lost in the maze of illusions, disregarding his commitments and virtues in the blind pursuit of self-gratification. He is a mixture of good and evil and in this diversity, in this struggle between his evil impulses and good intentions, lies the wonder, terror, pathos and beauty of life:

Life will not be boxed in boxes. It will not be wrapped and tied up with strings and set aside on a shelf to await a particular religious or moral use. As yet, we do not understand life, we do not ~~know what~~ what it is, what are the laws that govern it. At best we see ourselves hobbling along, responding to this

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<sup>34</sup>William Phillips, "The Imagery of Dreiser's Novels," PMLA, 78 (Dec. 1963), 585.

dream and that lust and unable to compel ourselves to gainsay the fires and appetites and desires of our bodies and minds. Some of these, in some of us strangely enough conform to the current needs or beliefs of a given society; and if we should be so fortunate as to find ourselves in that society, we are by reason of these ideals, favorites, statesmen, children of fortune, poets of the race. On the other hand, others of us who do not and cannot conform, are looked upon as horrific, to be stabilized, or standardized, and brought into the normal systole-diastole of things. Those of us endowed with these things in mind and blood are truly terrible to the mass — pariahs, failures, shams, disgraces.<sup>35</sup> (emphasis mine)

Dreiser presents before us the tragic stories of real individuals, who respond to their dreams and passions and cannot be "stabilized" and brought into social circulation, for they have already become mental and moral outcasts. He therefore warns American youth against ambition, yearning, aspiration, greed, selfishness, pursuit of physical pleasure — these are the forces which lure man to a disregard of moral norms and to consequent self-destruction. To him, evil is a force not only social, but also personal. All his novels as we have seen, are concerned with the struggle between the good and evil forces within the heart of man, as also with the results that accompany a choice of impulse and passion over reason and duty — "Greed, selfishness, vanity, hate, passion, love are all inherent in the least of us, and until such are eradicated, there can be no Utopia,"<sup>36</sup> he asserted.

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<sup>35</sup>Dreiser, A Book About Myself (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1922), pp. 55-57.

<sup>36</sup>Dreiser, Letters, II, p. 450.



A detailed study of choice and consequences in his major works, shows us how committed Dreiser was to the moral uplift of man. He is forever concerned with the moral consequences implicit in the spectacle of wealth and materialism, so prevalent in American society. To say that he crusaded for a greater play of instinct and vacillated between extravagant naturalism and moral sentimentalism is to underestimate grossly his contribution to our understanding of Man and to our own self-awareness.

Thus, we see that the senses of "elevated pleasure" and "high seriousness" are satisfied in Dreiser's tragedies. Stuart Sherman, his severest critic, also conceded this elevating essence in Dreiser's works — "I do not know where else in American fiction one can find the situation here presented dealt with so fearlessly, so intelligently, so exhaustively, so veraciously, and therefore with such unexceptionable moral effect."<sup>37</sup> It is difficult for Dreiser to resist a temptation to preach, to advise, to comment, to caution:

Life cannot go on without affection and tenderness — be sure of that. We cannot forever and ever crowd into cities and forget man for Mammon. There will come a day, and an hour, in each and every individual's life, when the need of despised and neglected relationships will weigh heavy on the soul. After all is said and done, we must truly love one another, or we must die alone, neglected,

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<sup>37</sup> Stuart Sherman, The Main Stream, p. 144.

despised and forgotten, as too many of us  
die.<sup>38</sup>

This is the essence of a philosophy formed through the years and the experience transmuted into expression. In a society dominated by materialism, the end for seeking, questing, groping souls is here presaged. But transcending all this welter of contradictions and conflicts, this dread of despair and doom, is Dreiser's faith — in Truth and Goodness. Trembling with profound pity over the dismal contortions of life, he is a tragic optimist, ever hopeful that somehow, sometime man's burdens will be lightened, when confident and assured, he opts for Truth and Goodness over Illusion and Passion:

We have the consolation of knowing that Evolution is ever in action, that the ideal is a light that cannot fail. Man will not forever balance thus between good and evil. When this jangle of free-will-instinct shall have been adjusted, when perfect understanding has given the former the power to replace the latter entirely, man will no longer vary. The needle of understanding will yet point steadfast and unwavering to the distinct pole of Truth.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>Dreiser, "The Loneliness of the City," Tom Watson's Magazine (October 1905), 474-475.

<sup>39</sup>Dreiser, Sister Carrie, pp. 70-71.

## CHAPTER V

### FRAYED FEATHERS

There is something exhilarating in the cutting off of all ties, the breaking of all bonds, the rejection of roots. Such was the tendency in the twenties in America, when private possessions and personal pleasures became the most significant goal in life, and any deep concern with individual spirituality or public welfare was buried under the prevailing obsession with opulent comfort. Material advantages and mechanist progress became primary. Once again, the frail whimper of conscience was crushed under the thunderous roar of the nuclear explosion, the jet missile and the rocket. It was at this time that William Faulkner rose strong and assertive against his country's moral indifference, raising the whimper to a crescendo and making it heard loud and clear amidst the mechanical din.

Complacent comfort of centrally air-conditioned homes was shattered by shrieks and sobs, the urban preoccupation with television was disrupted by visions of rape, murder and incest. Nor was the calm countryside spared. Faulkner's Mississippi district or Yoknapatawpha County was no pastoral Eden — the rutted, dusty roads, the eroded pine hills dotted with sparse cornfields; the ruined plantation house near Frenchman's Bend — what he found here he set down with passion and fury, in a rich, rhetorical and opaque style that was the perfect expression of his own tortured sensibility.

He discovered this district to be a deep southern region of Baptists and brothels, of shadows and swamps where oppression, fanaticism and arson reigned supreme. This he showed to be a measure of the world, the moral centre of the universe.

Faulkner's keen awareness of the pervasiveness and power of evil as also his firm belief in the rampancy of violence and chaos in life did not, however, totally darken his moral perspective. He had a firm faith in the power of stoic endurance and man's freedom of choice and also in his capacity not only to "endure" but to "prevail" as he became fond of reiterating after he was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1950. In the succinct words of Spivey, ". . . he supposed the Hebraic belief in pervasive and inescapable evil, moral growth through suffering, the availability of human choice and individual responsibility for what [man] made of life."<sup>1</sup>

Some Faulkner critics either deny or belittle Faulkner's emphasis on freedom of choice by asserting that he believed in determinism and total annihilation.<sup>2</sup> In Faulkner's words, "After all, there must be some things for which God cannot be accused by man and held responsible."<sup>3</sup> His protagonists are nearly always surrounded by hell and high water. But

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<sup>1</sup>H.E. Spivey, "Faulkner and the Adamic Myth: Faulkner's Moral Vision," Modern Fiction Studies, 19 (Feb.-Mar. 1973), 498-499.

<sup>2</sup>Harry Campbell, William Faulkner: A Critical Appraisal (New York: Cooper Square, 1970), p. 114.

<sup>3</sup>William Faulkner, Light in August (London: Chatto & Windus, 1960), p. 462.

they tower above their surroundings, enhancing our conception of the human-power through their ability to resist, assert, choose, will and act. As Mary Cooper Robb rightly observes:

His [Faulkner's] primary concern, after all is to show that a man must choose between right and wrong, for one set of human values and against another. The choosing must inevitably involve conflict, which indeed, is one of the necessary ingredients of any story.<sup>4</sup>

It is the "human heart in conflict with itself" which according to Faulkner can alone make good writing because "only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat."<sup>5</sup> The conflict also shows man under the "aspect of magnificence" achieving a personal grandeur and a vivid reality:

You write a story to tell about people, man in his constant struggle with his own heart, with the hearts of others, or with his environment. It's man in the ageless, eternal struggles which we inherit and we go through as though they'd never happened before, shown for a moment in a dramatic instant of the furious motion of being alive, that's all my story is.<sup>6</sup>

Particularly relevant to this study is an examination of Faulkner's "worst work," Sanctuary (1931). Presenting us with the first flow of Faulkner's modern discontent, this "dramatic instant" presents disturbingly enough, man in struggle with "his own heart." On this stage of Memphis

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<sup>4</sup>Mary C. Robb, William Faulkner: An Estimate of His Contribution to the American Novel (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1957), p. 24.

<sup>5</sup>William Faulkner, Stockholm Address.

<sup>6</sup>William Faulkner, Faulkner in the University, ed., F.L. Gwynn and J.L. Blotner (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 1959), p. 25.

society strut pimps and prostitutes, gangsters and murderers. Sanctuary also portrays the losing struggle of the aristocratic Horace Benbow, the old-fashioned liberal statesman with the new corrupt politicians and officers of justice. As Geismar observes, "How shall the artist better show the universal debasement of modern times than to turn the pure Lady into the contemporary Female, now wanton, graceless and degraded? The Female source of life as itself inherently vicious?"<sup>7</sup>

Sanctuary, which has variously been called a series of "episodes of sadism and pomography," or of "blood and brutality" flavoured with "niceties of sensationalism and necessities of commercialism,"<sup>8</sup> is in fact one of the rare masterpieces of Faulkner. Not only does it evoke a disgust for sensationalism, an aversion towards violence but it is also a critique of self-indulgence and sensuality. It is by no means a painfully drawn allegory of Southern Womanhood (Temple) being corrupted by Amoral Modernism (Popeye) resulting in total despair for Tradition (Horace).<sup>9</sup> In interpreting it thus, the theme appears only as a "cheap idea," as O'Donnell himself realizes. Richard Chase who, though he agrees with O'Donnell's "ridiculous personifications," yet condemns the

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<sup>7</sup>Maxwell Geismar, Writers in Crisis: The American Novel 1925-1940 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1963), p. 180.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>9</sup>George Marion O'Donnell, "Faulkner's Mythology", Kenyon Review, 1 (Summer 1939), 285-299.

allegorical theme as entertaining "the lowest of lowbrow fantasies."<sup>10</sup> While any perceptive reader cannot ignore the representative significance assumed by certain characters, they should not be seen as merely grotesque caricatures. Faulkner's theme is not as simple or as one-dimensional as O'Donnellor Chase would like to make it, nor is allegory commensurate with cheapness. Faulkner was certainly not referring to the allegory of his novel when he condemned its cheapness.<sup>11</sup> Much of the sustaining power and appeal of Sanctuary comes from the interplay of characters and from the depiction of moral struggle in individual personality and society.

Interestingly described as typification of Amoral Modernism, "social evil," an "embodiment of the ultimate extension of modern values,"<sup>12</sup> Popeye is not merely a man of tin and rubber — "a deracinated product of technology,"<sup>13</sup> as critics would have us believe. Though Faulkner emphasizes certain metallic and modernistic qualities in Popeye, yet they become the "evidence rather than the cause of his

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<sup>10</sup>Richard Chase, "Faulkner — The Great Years," The American Novel and Its Tradition (Garden City: Doubleday, 1957), pp. 238-239.

<sup>11</sup>William Faulkner, Introduction, Sanctuary (Modern Library, 1932).

<sup>12</sup>David L. Frazier, "Gothicism in 'Sanctuary': The Black Pall and the Crap Table," MFS, 2 (Autumn 1956), 123-124.

<sup>13</sup>P.P. Sharma, "The Sick World of William Faulkner," Indian Journal of American Studies, 11, No. 2 (July 1981), 85.

abnormality."<sup>14</sup> His very name, Popeye is representative of the popular American comic-strip hero, making him easily identifiable with his contemporary human beings. Though described in mechanical terms: his eyes: "looked like rubber knobs"; his face: "just went away, like the face of a wax doll set too near a hot fire and forgotten"; his tight suit and stiff hat: "all angles like a modernistic lampshade"; and in general possessed of "that vicious, depthless quality of stamped tin,"<sup>15</sup> Popeye is yet very much a thinking, feeling, free man with human attributes. In reality the "eye" that glows is but a cigarette, the "gothic mist" surrounding him is but tobacco smoke, his mechanical aura—the smell of brilliantine and his prowess of destruction — but an automatic pistol! Defective product of a loveless, syphilitic union, he is congenitally deficient. However, Popeye's syphilis is neither an exclusively "modern" disease, nor is it a "social disease" as Lawrance Thompson tacitly assumes.<sup>16</sup> It is rather a symbol of moral laxity as well as the pitiable consequence of an inability to master physical desire. Popeye viciously spits into a spring, shrinks in terror from an owl, and shoots a harmless dog. His cutting up of two

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<sup>14</sup>Joanne V. Creighton, "Self-Destructive Evil in 'Sanctuary,'" Twentieth Century Literature, 18, No. 4 (October 1972), 261.

<sup>15</sup>William Faulkner, Sanctuary (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961), pp. 6-7. All subsequent references are incorporated in the text.

<sup>16</sup>Lawrance Thompson, William Faulkner: An Introduction and Interpretation (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1963), p. 111.



little love birds and a couple of kittens foreshadows his murders of Tommy and Red. Also deliberate is his desire to assault Temple and confine her to a brothel to satisfy at will his perversions. Society is not at all to be blamed for Popeye's acts or freedom of movement, contrary to what Thompson implies.<sup>17</sup> Somebody had in fact "institutionalized the wretch," and Popeye had been released five years later for "impeccable behavior." Thus it is Popeye himself who can be held responsible for his morally violent actions.

The details of Popeye's birth and upbringing serve to reinforce rather than diminish his role as the quintessence of evil — the Anti-Christ. Ironically born on Christmas, he is the complete antithesis of Christ. Christ generated Love, Compassion, Purity, Life and Good. Popeye propagates Hatred, Selfishness, Corruption, Death and Evil. Black is his colour. His suit is black, his coat is black, the deadly, devilish black. He even smells black, ". . . like that black stuff that ran out of Bovary's mouth and down on her bridal veil, when they raised her head" (p. 8). Forced by impotence into perversion, knowing neither compassion nor morality, with not a care for the sanctity or dignity of others, Popeye personifies a vicious, mechanistic destructiveness that is ultimately suicidal. Though he is hardly shown in the grip of an actual moral dilemma,<sup>18</sup> his actions are a depiction

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 111-112.

<sup>18</sup> Creighton, "Self-Destructive Evil in 'Sanctuary,'" TCL, 261.

of evil within man and within society. His very existence is a reminder of the propensity for self-destructive evil within man which will manifest itself when he fails to exercise his regenerative capacity for love and also when he fails to defeat evil and consciously fight for the victory of his better instincts. The evil Popeye generates is conscious, deliberate, and wilful, since he chooses it over his inherent good impulses.

Temple Drake represents the subversion of Southern Womanhood — the defiled and impure receptacle of evil as well as the doer of evil. "With her high delicate head and her bold painted mouth," cool, predatory and discreet, she is for all the morality and warmth she has, one of those papier-mache Easter dolls filled with candy. At seventeen, she fits perfectly into the artificiality of her campus life; a life of discreet promiscuity, with apparent ease and abandon. Apportioning her favours between the college and town boys, she yet remains inviolate and unmoved. Ruby, the street-whore, recognizes the basic superficiality and selfishness of Temple's flirtatious behaviour when she says — "You'll slip out with the kids and burn their gasoline and eat their food, but just let a man so much as look at you and you faint away because your father the judge and your four brothers might not like it . . ." (p. 66).

Temple's coquetry is acceptable within the context of the college society in which she lives and her friends help cover up such indiscretions as slipping long after the regular hours into the dorm. Moreover, as Joanne Creighton points out, "Temple writing down her social engagements for the week so that she does not have to remember who her date is each day, indicates some boredom with the sterile rituals of illusive coquetry."<sup>19</sup> It is this provocative behaviour of Temple which leads the townboys to make lewd associations with her name on lavatory walls. These responses to her coquetry anticipate those of the men at Frenchman's Bend.

The "temple" of Miss Drake is her revered chastity which "gentlemen" must staunchly guard from violation. Her "sanctuary" is her privileged position in society. But Temple's gentleman defender, Gowan Stevens believes that the measure of a gentleman is his capacity to hold liquor. He never thinks of what might happen to Temple but only of her revelation that he has committed the "unforgivable sin" of not holding his drink — a revelation that will make him an outcaste in decent Virginia society. He can neither think nor act in any way except that established by his Virginia society code. His obsessive concern with social values has atrophied every one of his moral and human instincts. For him conformity to a sorry code has been carried to an

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<sup>19</sup>Creighton, "Self-Destructive Evil in 'Sanctuary,'" TCL, 263.

extreme "at once ludicrous and tragic."<sup>20</sup> For him, the choice lies not so much between good and evil explicitly, as between values social and moral. He chooses the former and subordinates his concern for Temple and her honour to his appearance of proving himself a thorough Virginia gentleman. More important is Temple's choice of her own misfortune and her own guilty part in it. She clings to her habits of arch provocativeness at Old Frenchman's Bend, forgetting that the social mores of her world are not prevalent in this world of gangsters and bootleggers. For them, the only relationship with a woman is physical and crude. Violent as it may be, their code yet possesses a vitality and forcefulness which at once rebels and attracts Temple.

Caught between her longing for the safety of her own world and her desire to share in the "adventure" of this new one into which she has stumbled, she attempts to persuade herself that the two worlds are identical and that her father has the power of control. But her wish to be violated reveals itself in the constant advance and retreat, provocation and cringing withdrawal, that mark her behaviour at Goodwin's. Temple's flirtatiousness translated into the language of Old Frenchman's place is construed as an open invitation for violation. In the images of Temple standing still while running, is apparent her vacillation between

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<sup>20</sup> Olga Vickery, The Novels of William Faulkner (Louisiana State University Press, 1964), p. 106.

wanting to experience evil and trying to run away from it. She has already lost the virginity of her mind — an armour against evil. Time and again, she is given the opportunity to leave, and Ruby even warns her to be quiet, to stop running, to stop impressing her fear and desire on the men. But she persists in her running like an animal in a feigningly evasive mating dance, "half fascinated by the idea of her own rape and half-dreading the actual experience."<sup>21</sup> She wants to participate in Ruby's world without losing her position in her own. In Ruby's room, Temple goes through the ritual of her victimization almost with an excited anticipation. She combs her hair, renews her make-up, glances at her watch repeatedly and lies down to wait "like an effigy on an ancient tomb" (p. 84). The alternation between fear and desire is expressed in her fantasies — her vision as somehow being sealed against contact; as a matronly school teacher, as an old man with a long, white beard and even as a dead-body in a coffin. Balanced with this dread is the frenzied yearning for Popeye's rapacious touch: "Touch me, coward! You're a coward if you don't! (p. 122). At the very moment of her rape, her scream is one of mingled protest and exultation; "Something is happening to me!" (p. 122).

Frazier imaginatively describes how the crib could have helped Temple to escape her ravishment and how it became the very place where she sought violation. The

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

choice to escape could have led to salvation but the seeking of evil turns the crib into the place of damnation. "In the crib," says Frazier, "Temple prostitutes herself and is violated. The crib as temple is debased, the body as dwelling place of God is violated."<sup>22</sup> Temple is ironically ravaged through the corn-cob — the very symbol of fecundity — horribly used by one who is sterile and represents evil and perversion. The corncrib becomes a religious shrine appropriate to unholy "worship." Temple's desecration is total and so is her utter corruption. Only a few hours after the assault, she eats and drinks the first of many future glasses of gin. As Popeye stops his car at a gasoline station in Jefferson, he inadvertently gives her a chance to escape. But her only concern is to avoid the eye of an acquaintance and she symbolically seeks sanctuary behind a trash barrel where Popeye finds her. It is her fascination with the idea of adventure and victimization which holds her immobile. Even at Miss Reba's whore-house, Temple enjoys to the hilt her role as victim-prisoner. The door she locks is to keep herself within rather than her aggressor without. Her capacity for moral commitments and responsibilities declines till it has almost disappeared. Free of the conventions, taboos or connections with her father's world she can openly indulge in her animal-like pursuit of carnal passion. She has absolutely

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<sup>22</sup>D.L. Frazier, "Gothicism in 'Sanctuary': The Black Pall and the Crap Table," Modern Fiction Studies, 2, No. 3 (Autumn 1956), 118.

no care or concern for Red as a human being. At the moment of his greatest danger, her crude insistence is only on obtaining maximum physical gratification. Even after the murder of Red by Popeye, Temple's only regret is that "it will never be again." These episodes force the reader to feel utter disgust with female lust and human corruption.

Only a few weeks later, Horace is horrified when Temple recounts her experiences at the Old Frenchman's place "with actual pride, a sort of naive and impersonal vanity . . . ." (pp. 258-259). "I got mad, because he was so long doing it," she narrates unabashedly. Her total degradation is seen in her perverted impulse to revenge herself on those who have not harmed her, stemming out of her hatred for Popeye, her father and her four stalwart brothers. The reason is that though Judge Drake had caused fear-based inhibitions in her he had given her no sound basis for ethical behaviour. She, therefore, expresses through her actions her resentment of her father's code and her need for guidance and control. Her final moral degradation is seen in the trial scene where her complete indifference permits her to help send an innocent man, Lee Goodwin, to his death. Faulkner brilliantly handles these ironies — While she stares at the back of the courtroom, Temple is goaded to perjury by some unknown fear, though her "father's a judge" as she always reiterated. Irony reaches a climax when the District Attorney lauds Temple as a most sacred epitome of Southern Womanhood. Implicit here is Faulkner's condemnation of the immorality

of "modern" young womanhood which Temple personifies. Earlier it was Popeye's choice of Evil and Temple's willing acquiescence. Now it is Temple's choice of Evil (Perjury) and the Court's willing acquiescence. Evil had prospered then and it prospers now — leaving in its wake a ruined body, violation of moral code and subversion of ethical values.

The significance of the female as the sanctuary of male idealism and as the source of utter disillusionment is reinforced by the actions and histories of the other women in the novel. Narcissa plays a role that is only a varied form of Temple's role. She is the namesake of Narcissus, "the mythological figure who symbolizes self-destructive self-love."<sup>23</sup> Her reaction to Byron's letters is not unlike Temple's to the possibility of ravishment. Disgusted by the thought that some unknown man thinks of her in that way, Narcissa is yet fascinated enough to preserve those letters. Eventually they are stolen and in the short story, "There was a Queen," Narcissa has to give herself to get the letters back, fulfilling the desire that originally prevented her from destroying them. She feels that the moral code of their privileged class is threatened by her brother's interest in a woman of low repute. As she carefully explains to Horace, "I don't care where else you go nor what you do. I don't care how many women you have nor who they are. But I cannot have my brother mixed up with a woman people are

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<sup>23</sup>Creighton, 265.



talking about" (p. 220). She points out that while he has been babbling about truth, justice and responsibility, he has succeeded in offending social decorum past the point of forgiveness by taking another man's wife for his own and then abandoning her, and finally by sheltering a "street-walker," a "murderer's woman" in his home. She attempts to frighten him with public opinion, shame him by an appeal to the Benbow past and tradition, bribe him with an offer of a better criminal lawyer than he is for Goodwin's defence. When all these fail, she tries to disillusion him about Ruby's motives and her needs. Her final step is to deny even lip service to truth and justice: "I don't see that it makes any difference who did it. The question is, are you going to stay mixed up with it?" (p. 221). Her father too is a judge and she too takes her social position as licence to interfere in the working of justice. This judging, meddling, smugly self-satisfied attitude makes her totally culpable. She acts expediently and effectively to thwart justice with law and to return a humbled Horace to Belle. Her interfering activities help to effect Popeye's freedom from punishment and precipitate the innocent Goodwin's conviction. In fact she lights the fire that ends in the lynching of Goodwin. Thus, symbolically she is an ally to Popeye's evil and differs from Temple only in degree.

Little Belle too, in her choice of evil is a potential Temple Drake "with the green-snared promise of unease" (pp. 13-14). Her picture already suggests an aura of lost innocence to Horace, "he looked at the familiar image with a kind

of quiet horror and despair, at a face suddenly older in sin than he would ever be, a face more blurred than sweet, at eyes more secret than soft" (p. 200). Horace's vision of Little Belle is mingled with that of Temple as he presages even her seduction and journey into irrevocable corruption.

The only motive force toward good is exerted by Horace Benbow. He alone represents the union of morality and law against evil and injustice. "Horace is an idealist, a gentleman in the true sense of the word, a preserver of traditions and a sensitive exponent of justice in all its forms," claims Thompson.<sup>24</sup> Horace has a strong belief in the moral foundation of the code of gentility and ineffectually tries to infuse moral idealism into that moribund code. Experience mocks the poetic ideal as his marriage settles into the routine of fetching shrimp from the station and locking doors. His midsummer visions of Belle's and Narcissa's innocence are shattered by Narcissa's insensitive and self-centred appeal to dissuade him from fighting Goodwin's case. The "grape-arbor" vision is tarnished by his recognition of Little Belle's potential for choosing defilement in the manner of Temple.

Thus, though his faith in the purity and goodness of woman is shattered, Horace does not give up hope. Against contrary persuasion, he yet chooses to live and fight for "law, justice and civilization," come what may. His visits

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<sup>24</sup>Lawrance Thompson, William Faulkner: An Introduction and Interpretation, p. 107.

to Jefferson "Ole Miss" and Memphis are imbued with the faith that goodness will ultimately prevail, that the world is peopled with gentlemen and benevolently ordered by a God who may be "foolish at times, but at least He's a gentleman" (p. 337). He, however, finds himself conducting a mock battle with an invincible opponent: Evil. Armed with Truth, Honour, Justice and Faith, he jumps into the arena. His defense of Goodwin he takes to be a defense of his ideals. If he can prove that justice exists, his belief in Goodness and Truth has to have validity.

However, Horace is soon frustrated, and the source of his frustration is the discovery that the forces of evil have so overpowered men that the forces of good have been reduced to virtual impotence. When driven to it, Narcissa is prepared to admit that the miscarriage of justice is less important than her familial position in Jefferson. Senator Snopes and Eustace Graham are only concerned about their political advancement. They have prostituted their legal services to the highest bidder. Goodwin himself is reluctant to oppose Popeye's wrongdoing and Ruby indifferently prepares to pay Horace for Goodwin's defence in the only way she can. With her unwilling help he learns of Temple's presence at the Old Frenchman's, with Snopes's information he tracks her down. With dawning horror he learns of Temple's complicity in her victimization. The responsibility of Tommy's murder, he realizes, is as much Temple's who provoked it as it is Goodwin's who did not act to prevent it, or Popeye's who actually committed it. Gowan

Stevens is guilty of leading to it as also Ruby who anticipated it and yet remained indifferent. In utter desperation he wishes that all these including himself might enter a lethal gas chamber where life would be over, quickly and painlessly.

Defeated, Horace yet risks a last throw by believing that Goodwin will be exonerated from legal culpability "just because . . . it was right, necessary to the harmony of things that it be done" (p. 331). Although he recognizes the victory of good impulses in the "unchaste" Ruby, he is pathetically naive about the existence and choice of evil by others. He refuses to understand Goodwin's terror of Popeye in revealing the truth and shudders at the kind of people Goodwin and Ruby must have known to inspire the distrust in them for men in general. He does not even suspect that Narcissa might have interfered with his case. He is totally unable to retaliate to the absolute flaunting of perjury in Temple's testimony. His inability to confront evil is evident in the way he gives up the case without objecting to the Prosecutor's rhetoric or subjecting Temple's testimony to a cross-examination. As he admits, "I lack courage: that was left out of me. The machinery is all here but it won't run" (p. 18).

The ineffectuality of Horace, Faulkner attributes to his naivette, to his childish innocence and inability to understand the intermingling of good and evil in the human psyche. Any acquaintance with evil leaves him feeling helpless, compromised, nauseous. His idealization of women

as embodiments of purity is also shattered by his knowledge that there is an "affinity for evil" in all women (p. 241). He recoils from the fact that evil resides in every sanctuary which man as an idealist dreams of. Corruption, he realizes can be both moral and spiritual. The final and complete collapse of Horace's ethical system comes when he sees the Jefferson mob acting in the name of justice and religion, driving Ruby and her sick babe into the streets and ruthlessly lynching Goodwin. With horror he realizes that man's moral code has deteriorated into nothing more than corrupted sentiments — "there's a corruption about even looking upon evil, even by accident, you cannot haggle, traffic with putrefaction" (p. 152), he concludes.

The sexual corruption, bigotry, class-prejudice, social injustice, hypocrisy, cruelty, self-righteousness that Horace discovers are evils that transcend time and place. "It is life itself that he is out of touch with, not just the time in which he lives,"<sup>25</sup> is Volpe's judgement. The crudity of actual life and the interweaving of good and evil in the very texture of experience leave Horace bewildered and helpless. Anticipating total victory, he submits to total defeat. What Horace does not realise is that if one does not "look upon" evil and "haggle" with it, one cannot defeat it. The measure of life's success lies in the intensity of the struggle. Discovery of a "logical pattern" in

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<sup>25</sup>E.L. Volpe, A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner (New York: Noonday Press, 1964), p. 142.

evil does not "necessitate annihilation." Men are destroyed not because they discover the pattern of evil, but because they take destruction upon themselves through their inability to "haggle, traffic" and defeat evil. Thus, the novel which was said to express a "rigidly determinist world view" as well as a "strident misogyny without even an illusion of choice,"<sup>26</sup> "a nightmare vision of society,"<sup>27</sup> does, in fact, portray the all-pervasive reality of CHOSEN evil. The corruption and destruction described is in reality, the "image of society's own self-corruption and self-destruction," and of "society's choice of evil over good."<sup>28</sup>

The sequel to Sanctuary, written twenty years later, entitled Requiem for A Nun (1951), also received little attention from critics. It was often dismissed as an attempt "to correct the earlier impression" of Sanctuary, a "progression from a cynical sensationalism to a broadly hopeful humanism."<sup>29</sup> A close study of the novel-play however, reaffirms the responsibility of his fate on man and places upon him the burden of his own salvation. Starting from effects, with the pronouncing

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<sup>26</sup>George Toles, "The Space Between: A Study of Faulkner's 'Sanctuary,'" Texas Studies in Literature and Language, 22, No. 1 (Spring 1980), 46.

<sup>27</sup>William Rossky, "The Pattern of Nightmare in 'Sanctuary' or Miss Reba's Dogs," MFS, 15, No. 4 (Winter 1969-70), 503.

<sup>28</sup>Creighton, "Self-Destructive Evil in 'Sanctuary,'" TCL, 269.

<sup>29</sup>William R. Brown, "Faulkner's Paradox in Pathology and Salvation: 'Sanctuary,' 'Light in August,' 'Requiem for A Nun,'" TSLL, 9 (August 1967), 445.

of the death sentence on Nancy, the action is so arranged as to probe beneath the facts for causes and motives.

The historical sections preceding each act serve to set the scene, but their major task is to provide historical perspective, to place Temple's moral crisis against the background of man's moral history as a continuity. In Part I, "The Courthouse," the founders of Jefferson face a moral dilemma, the choice of absolving themselves of responsibility by placing the burden upon an unknown higher authority, or accepting the responsibility of paying for the lock and resolving the problem themselves. Thomas Jefferson Pettigrew informs them that since the lock was the property of the U.S. government, their charging it to the Indian Department would be ethically wrong because both are departments of the same government. The conferees win over this "damned moralist" by naming the town after him. But they have no town. So they set to building a courthouse, and the frontier settlement becomes the town of Jefferson. A trader, Ratcliffe feels offended at the failure of the settlers to cheat the government out of the cost of the lock:

It's like Old Moster and the rest of them up there that run the luck, would look down at us and say, well, well, looks like them durn pucker-woods down there don't want them fifty dollars we was going to give them free-gratis-for-nothing. So maybe they dont want nothing from us. So maybe we better do like they seem to want, and let them sweat and swivet and scrabble through the best they can by themselves.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> William Faulkner, Requiem for A Nun (New York: Modern Library, 1951), p. 43. Subsequent references will be incorporated in the text.

Private individuals decide to pay Holston the cost of his lock, but there remains a nagging uncertainty that they may have committed a fatal and irremediable error by assuming the responsibility on themselves.

The founding of Jefferson, therefore, is marred by the presence (or absence) of the lock. The lock, as Joseph Gold explains, is a symbol of "lack of trust" between man and man and the fact that it is useless and described as such by Faulkner indicates his view that man creates his own errors."<sup>31</sup> Once the seeds of evil are planted, the harvest is continual. The evils of Jefferson thus become the evils of civilization. The values of independence and responsibility do not reside, in this case, with the individual, but rather with the community, and Faulkner presents the emerging town of Jefferson as a society of men organizing themselves specifically in order that individual liberty will not be threatened. To them government means no more than "respect without servility, allegiance without abasement to the government which they had helped to found and had accepted with pride but still as free men, still free to withdraw from it at any moment when the two of them found themselves no longer compatible" (pp. 107-108). Theirs is a free government of free men too, so long as the government "remembered to let men live free, not under it, but beside it."<sup>32</sup> Thus, Faulkner's emphasis on man's moral

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<sup>31</sup> Joseph Gold, William Faulkner: A Study in Humanism from Metaphor to Discourse (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967), p. 102.

<sup>32</sup> Panthea Reid Broughton, "Requiem for A Nun: No Part in Rationality," The Southern Review, 8, New Series No. 4 (Autumn 1972), 751-752.



responsibility to himself and to others, as well as on freedom of choice is clearly evident in this prose section of the book.

Requiem's second mythic section is entitled "The Golden Dome" (Beginning was the word). In 1903, the State Capital was built much bigger, brighter and higher than the Jefferson courthouse but proportionately further from the freedom of the individual. The "gilded pustule" relieves the individual of his right to determine his own actions. As Olga Vickery explains, "The human duty and privilege of exercising self-government is replaced by the social duty and privilege of being governed."<sup>33</sup> A gain in security is balanced by a loss of human freedom. Faulkner seems to be outraged at any readiness to relinquish individual freedom to buy a little security. Thus the Golden Dome embodies the final victory of an abstract Concept or an "Idea" over concrete, living individuals. The individual is left with no freedom, no choice and therefore no life, as Faulkner implies, "A towering, frantic edifice" seems to have taken over control and devitalized man's existence. Powerless and in vain shall he continue to yearn and long for freedom while the symbol of laws and rules stands poised like a "card-house over the abyss of the mortgaged generations" (p. 247). Faulkner is certainly in favour of a system of laws but he asserts that they should be made for man and not man for them. When laws become so rigid as to

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<sup>33</sup> Olga Vickery, The Novels of William Faulkner, pp. 116-117.

inhibit man's freedom of action, they ought to be made defunct, since their very purpose is defeated.

The third prose-section, "The Jail" (Nor Even Yet Quite Relinquish) serves as an extension of the theme of individual responsibility for sin and crime. It is the place which separates the legally virtuous and wicked, though morally it is unable to make any such distinctions. It is also the place which isolates man from his community, bringing him face to face with his own guilt and punishment. It is through this building that Faulkner stresses the continuity and essence of human nature which shall forever remain unchanged. It is on the window of the jail that a scrawl brings to life the old dead loves and fears and hopes of a time long, long ago. One can still listen to the voice of Cecilia Farmer saying "Listen, stranger; this was myself: this was I" (p. 324). It is this sense of identity, of individual liberty which Faulkner wishes to impress upon the reader, the freedom to choose a course of action, as also the unchanging "gestures of passion and hope and travail and endurance, of the men and women and children in their successive overlapping generations" (p. 214).

The tragedy of twentieth century America as Faulkner sees it, is the loss of the individual's sense of identity and the concomitant loss of moral responsibility. The individual, for him, is an entity who creates history, who must feel the flood of rushing passions but also learn to stem it. His personal sense of identity is fulfilled in his recognition of his freedom, his moral sense in the correct use of it. In the words of Joseph Gold, "At each stage, Jefferson, Jackson,

Jail and Temple, there is the possibility of alternative. Man is continually given a choice."<sup>34</sup>

In other words, Man is free; he can choose not to sin. But man is often weak. As Temple declares, one must decide:

never even to look on evil and corruption  
You've got to be already prepared to resist it,  
say no to it, long before you see it, you must  
have already said no to it before you even know  
what it is" (pp. 252-253).

The courtroom scene with which Sanctuary concluded is echoed at the beginning of Requiem for A Nun (drama Section: Act I). Once again, Temple is legally absolved of any guilt, and once again she prepares to escape by travel. She is again a tortured being, engaged in a desperate moral struggle. Her second child has been smothered in its crib (symbolic of Christian overtones), the servant-murderess is to be hanged for the crime. Temple knows that she too has a part in the crime, but lacks the courage to accept her moral guilt. Gavin Stevens acts as Horace's counterpart and persuades Temple to uphold justice. Acting as her conscience, goading her on to self-awareness and self-judgement, he is convinced that Temple will rise to the occasion.

In Faulkner's brilliant depiction of her moral struggle, Temple initially adopts the role of bereaved mother and insults Stevens for acting as attorney for the murderess. But she soon strips off the mask of "victim" herself, for there is an inextricable link she bears with the culprit.

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<sup>34</sup>Joseph Gold, William Faulkner, p. 102.

Both are ex-whores, one in body, the other in mind as well. Temple has provoked assault, caused and witnessed murder. Hence she is the more corrupt. Only in Nancy's company could Temple relive her experiences and be relieved of being the respectable 'Mrs. Stevens,' while exulting in the recollected experiences of Temple Drake. But unlike Nancy, she cannot reconcile the past with the present. The presence of Pete disturbs her carefully maintained equilibrium between Miss Temple Drake and Mrs. Gowan Stevens. Once again she chooses physical gratification and evil in the expression of her desire to elope with Pete. This time she is cautious enough to burn the bridges behind her, and is prepared for a final break with "respectability" and with her family. She also knows well enough that Nancy's murder of the child was the only way to prevent her from falling irremediably into the throes of evil again.

Gavin's refusal to treat Temple as "bereaved mother" makes her assume indifference to Nancy. But her return from California two days before Nancy's execution is eloquent proof of her deep involvement in Nancy's act, an admission which she transforms into yet another defense: "So Nancy must be saved. So you send for me, or you and Bucky between you, or anyway here you are and here I am" (p. 79). She offers to write a note from Mrs. Stevens, the bereaved mother, seeking clemency for her former servant. She even suggests that a certificate of insanity will accomplish more than a confession from herself. This too is rejected by Stevens. He wants Temple to recognize her responsibility in the crime, admit it and

seek penitence: "We're not concerned with death. That's nothing: any handful of petty facts and sworn documents can cope with that. That's all finished now; we can forget it" (p. 88).

As for Temple, any falsehoods to save Nancy will do: "Can't you get it through your head that I will do anything, anything?" And then Gavin, as if on cue, touches the right nerve —

Stevens: "Only Truth can cope with that. Or love."

Temple (harshly): "Love, Oh, God, Love."

Stevens: Call it pity then. Or courage or simple honor, honesty or a simple desire for the right to sleep at night" (pp. 88-89).

Still in the grip of a moral dilemma, Temple contemptuously makes a further attempt at evasion:

For no better reason than that. Just to get it told, breathed aloud, into words, sound . . . . Why blink your own rhetoric? Why don't you go on and tell me its for the good of my soul — if I have one? (pp. 89-90).

Stevens goes on to insist that the issue is one to be settled by Temple, not by Mrs. Stevens. To Temple's evasion, "Temple Drake is dead," Stevens answers with persistent moral reiteration, "The past is never dead. It's not even past" (p. 90). He persuades her that her revelation of the truth may save Nancy with a reprieve. But Temple refuses. She sends Stevens away, only to phone him immediately. She has made her choice. She will confess. Her decision is made with no illusions about Nancy being saved. She realises the impossibility of such a desire, for Nancy is doomed irrevocably to execution. The confession may ultimately save Temple

herself, but its immediate end is justice — the recognition and assertion of moral responsibility.

In Act II, convinced that her own past actions have precipitated a sequence of events in which she herself stands to blame for the death of her baby, and for the imminent hanging of Nancy, Temple confronts the Governor with the truth. Faulkner brilliantly dramatizes her moral predicament. Still in a turmoil, she is unable to decide her course of action. She prevaricates, pretends, exaggerates, hesitates, becoming bitter and flippant by turns. Cynically she questions the value of what she is forcing herself to do, describing it as "just anguish for the sake of anguish" (p. 133). Her last feeble but tenacious defense is to describe Temple Drake from the point of view of Mrs. Gowan Stevens, hoping that such detachment will preserve her from further moral post-mortem of her past.

In her confession, Temple insists that she alone was responsible for the acts eight years ago which have led to the present situation. She was free to have left Gowan during their drunken ride, or escaped on the road to the Memphis brothel. She chose that particular pattern of events because:

Temple Drake liked evil. So I saw the murder or anyway the shadow of it, and the man took me to Memphis, and I know that too, I had two legs and I could see, and I could have simply screamed up the main street of any of the little towns we passed . . . the only difference being that I didn't. But not me, not Temple. I chose the murderer — (p. 125).

She could have climbed down the drainpipe or disguised herself as the Negro maid and escaped from Miss Reba's house.

But the "bad" was "already there waiting" in her when Popeye brought Red to her and indulged in voyeuristic pleasure.

"I fell what I called in love with (Red)," she confesses, and wrote letters "better than you would expect from a seventeen year old amateur" (p. 134). She acknowledges that there was a dodging, the seeking of a false sanctuary in her choosing to marry Gowan Stevens, without love. But she also knew that "she still had the legs and the eyes; she could walk, escape from it any moment she wished . . . ." But motherhood seals even that avenue. "Now she couldn't escape; she had waited too long." She makes a sincere effort to make the marriage work. But mutual trust and understanding, so necessary to such a union, is totally non-existent in the alliance of Gowan and Temple. Gowan has married her out of a sense of shame and duty, Temple for the sake of respectability. She finds herself unable to satiate Gowan's increasing appetite for gratitude, the sort of forgiving which after six years "debased not only the forgiven but the forgiven's gratitude" (p. 151). It results in Gowan suspecting the paternity of their children. Pete's demand for money in return for Temple's letters to his brother Red is a godsend for Temple. Her unknown fears have now taken a tangible form. The letters she thought she had forgotten "turned up again and then I found out that I not only hadn't forgot about the letters, I hadn't even reformed —" (p. 135).

Pete's presence thus brings Temple to another moral crisis. As Gavin suggests later, since Pete resembled Red, whatever desire Temple had for Red was reawakened. Besides,

she had struggled so long to appease Gowan that she welcomed a "man so single, so hard and ruthless, so impeccable in amorality, as to have a kind of integrity, purity, who would . . . never need nor intend to forgive anyone anything . . ." (p. 273). Hence her choice to elope with Pete and fall "into her old ways." Nancy tries to dissuade her but Temple is firm — "You heard me. I'm going to do it" (p. 167). On completing her confession, Temple realizes that the place of the Governor has been taken by her husband. But she does not care any longer. Her moral awareness has grown and at the end of the book she remains ashamed of her guilt and engaged in exploring the possibilities of salvation.

That Nancy Mannigoe, the Negress maid-servant, should smother Temple's baby, willingly sending herself to the gallows in order to save Temple, Gowan and Bucky, is rather difficult to accept. But a careful probing into the intricacies of Nancy's choice of murder, increases our admiration for this "nun." With intuitive understanding, Nancy is aware of the social, moral and human implications of Temple's choice between Gowan and Pete. Her act of murdering the child is certainly not an effort to reclaim Temple to respectability, for she realizes the sterility of such social concepts as well as does Temple. Nor is her decisive and violent action meant simply to shock Temple into a sense of guilt. But it is Nancy's attempt to make Temple see that the solution does not lie in escape, that her only hope is to accept and endure and by so doing find not happiness but peace.



Nancy first tries everything she can to prevent Temple from eloping with Pete. When she finds the money and the jewels that Temple has prepared to take with her, she hides them. She tries to reason that when Pete gets disgusted of waiting, he may leave without Temple or perhaps the delay will bring Temple to her senses. But Pete is shrewder than Nancy can imagine. The possession of Temple and the baby will provide him with a steady source of income and he offers the letters to Temple, saying that she is free to destroy them. But Temple refuses to take the letters because then she would again have to choose between fleeing with Pete and resuming the pretense of marriage with Gowan. Having tried threat and argument to no avail, Nancy in desperation sacrifices her own life and that of the child in the belief that pain and suffering may at last prove strong enough to break through Temple's egotism and prevent her from regressing into the Temple Drake of Sanctuary.

There is, however, another important motive to Nancy's act which Temple herself articulates: "Oh yes, I know that answer too; that was brought out here tonight too: that a little child shall not suffer in order to come unto Me. So good can come out of evil" (p. 208). Nancy also believes in an afterlife for herself and the child, and hence willingly seeks the public gallows. Edmond Volpe rightly says, "Nancy acts with full moral awareness; it is as if she arises out of the swift flowing tide of life, and, individually

determines to dam up the irresponsible drift of those caught in the undertow of guilt."<sup>35</sup>

Faulkner does not absolve Gowan Stevens of moral responsibility either. He marries Temple to right a wrong. He sees himself as a magnanimous "gentleman" offering the redeeming security of marriage to a woman who had not only spent a month in a Memphis whorehouse, but who had liked being there. Gowan's attitude toward his wife is one of the forgiver who is forever demanding increasing doses of gratitude till after about a year, "his restiveness under the onus of accepting gratitude began to take the form of doubting the paternity of their child" (pp. 264-265). It is through the persuasive efforts of Gavin that Gowan Stevens realizes the truth of Temple's share in the murder of their child as also his own indirect responsibility in the decision of Temple to elope. He admits his guilt and decides to begin life anew,

In fact this may be the time for me to start saying sorry for the next eight-year term. Just give me a little time. Eight years of gratitude might be a habit a little hard to break" (p. 178).

Like Benbow in Sanctuary, Gavin Stevens' concern is to re-establish justice as a moral and personal concept instead of merely a legal and social precept. By making Temple and Gowan aware of their guilt and by forcing them to accept responsibility for their actions, he transcends his office and function — the lawyer is replaced by the attendant

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<sup>35</sup>Volpe, A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner, p. 277.

priest whose duty is to guide his people to self-knowledge. Gavin too makes a moral choice of a kind. By leading men to desire truth, by putting others before himself, Gavin achieves the greatest happiness available to man — a sense of duty fulfilled. The three symbolic edifices of social justice — the courthouse, the state capitol and the jail — are thus transcended by self-justice. Faulkner's view in the book comes out thus:

For each generation and each individual the "pristine air will continue to be shattered," for, each individual in each generation must face his own moral dilemma, must make his own choice and must seek his own salvation.

However isolated and private the world of an individual, he still has a physical and social existence in the public world which, therefore has certain claims on him. Rebellion against and withdrawal from society are as much social acts as conformity to its codes. Man in conflict "with his heart and with the hearts of others" is dramatized beautifully in Light in August (1932). In this book Faulkner succeeds in bringing to life the social relationships and ethical anxieties in the human world. Because of the interpenetration and interdependence of the private and public worlds, each character is complex and multi-dimensional. He is at once subject and object, observer and observed, creator and created.

Psychologically warped by knowledge of his coloured blood, humiliated in childhood by race prejudice, bullied by Protestant fanaticism, Joe Christmas is "the most solitary character in American fiction," the "ultimate personification

of modern loneliness." He is a character deserving pity and careful analysis rather than criticism, for, he is an "abstraction from the moment he appears."<sup>36</sup> Confused, alienated in search of his own identity, he has something definitely rootless about him, as though "no town nor city was his, no street, no walls, no square of earth his home."<sup>37</sup> He is constantly shown as wearing a serge suit and a white shirt, symbolical of his mixed blood and his "hat is cocked at an angle, arrogant and baleful above his still face" (p. 27). Everyone notes his air of cold and quiet contempt and the foreman's words are expressive of the general viewpoint when he says, "We ought to run him through the planer. Maybe that will take that look off his face" (p. 28). Christmas is later run through a planer of suffering but "that look" comes off his face only at the moment of his death. The attitude of the foreman here is similar to that of the reader, lacking compassion and patience.

After being shown Joe Christmas at his repellent worst, Faulkner takes us back into his childhood to trace the causes and motives that have led Joe to become what he is. A ruthless murderer who now fantasises, "God loves me too," is the product of a complete absence of love in his formative years. His experiences in the orphanage (beyond memory) were the

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<sup>36</sup> Alfred Kazin, "The Stillness of 'Light in August,'" rpt. in William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism, ed., F.J. Hoffman and Olga Vickery (Michigan State University Press, 1960), pp. 253 and 248.

<sup>37</sup> William Faulkner, Light in August (London: Chatto & Windus, 1960), p. 27. All future references in the text will

ones that lead to one multiple impression on Joe — rejection, self-hatred, hatred of others.

When the dietitian is discovered in the act of love-making by Joe, she is convinced that he intends to report her transgression. She cannot conceive that Joe has nothing to tell, except confess his own crime of stealing pink toothpaste; that his silence under her questioning is not cunning but fear; that he expects not the half dollar bribe she gives him, but a whipping. He is profoundly shocked by the failure of punishment; his moral world turns topsy-turvy. So accustomed is he to the Calvinist code of sin and punishment for what he considers to be a crime — stealing toothpaste and disturbing the dietitian's privacy. That he is totally unprepared for the bribe, the kind words and the attempt to replace Law with Love. "It is this evasion of Law which Joe distrusts,"<sup>38</sup> and which ultimately leads him to distrust and hate especially those who offer love. This results in Joe's complete disgust for women and for their "tendency to blur through pity or sentimentality the clear cut patterns of crime and punishment."<sup>39</sup>

By the time the McEacherns adopt the boy, he is already shaped to reject love and respond only to hatred. McEachern, besides, is a ruthless and bigoted man, cold, hard and cruel, a Presbyterian fanatic. His attempts to transform Joe into

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<sup>38</sup>Alwyn Berland, "'Light in August': The Calvinism of William Faulkner," MFS, 8, No. 2 (Summer 1962), 162.

<sup>39</sup>Michael Millgate, William Faulkner (New York: Barnes & Noble Inc., 1961), p. 47.

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an acceptable Presbyterian are virtually wasted, despite the merciless whippings and arduous prayer sessions. Mrs. McEachern tries to be sympathetic but Joe hates her kindly gestures more than her husband's atrocities:

It was the woman: that soft kindness which he believed himself doomed to be forever victim of and which he hated worse than he did the hard and ruthless justice of men (p. 158).

By being denied a system of sanctions administered with love at a tender age, Joe is rendered incapable of giving or receiving affection throughout his life. His wounded aggressiveness is turned upon himself. Unable to hurt others for fear of punishment he seeks to be hurt in anticipation of punishment.

The chapters on Christmas' childhood and boyhood, have usually been interpreted as a kind of case history, apparently making him out to be the "tragic helpless victim of naturalistic fiction, destroyed by forces beyond his control."<sup>40</sup> This, however is a misleading interpretation. Though influenced greatly by unjust society and a perverted religious conscience, Joe cannot be absolved of the responsibility of bringing about his own tragic fate. As Longley analyses, "the wellspring of all his actions is his refusal to surrender to (that) conditioning."<sup>41</sup> The peculiar quality of Joe, besides his air of contempt and a sense of rootlessness, is his disregard of the social restraints of job, marriage

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<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> John L. Longley Jr., "Joe Christmas: The Hero in the Modern World," rpt. in William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism, p. 269.

or children. Faulkner cleverly refrains from telling us Joe's exact heritage. If he has any Negro blood in him, it is obviously a negligible percentage, leaving him free to live as a white man if he chooses to: "He don't look no more like a nigger than I do," says a white character. This is the most crucial point in Light in August. Christmas is free to choose his identity. His freedom is further demonstrated by his determination to keep his own name. The dietitian's abuses, the taunts of the children, and Doc Hines' attitude lead Joe to think of himself as tainted. McEachern brings him up as a white child. McEachern's inculcation of the worship of Moloch-Jehovah obscures Joe's instinctual responses toward God and his conscience. Any spiritual relationship is submerged in an intricate and deadly game of good and evil, reward and punishment. This is readily acceptable to Joe because it makes his life totally predictable, relieving him of the necessity for self-judgement and responsibility. Once a Negro yard-boy says to Joe, "You don't know what you are. And worse than that, you won't never know. You'll live and you'll die, and you won't never know" (p. 363). True enough, Joe never knows his identity because he does not want to. As a result, he is represented as being torn between consciously trying to act as a white man, and consciously trying to act as a Negro, even though his Southern conditioning makes him detest that possibility. In the fifteen years of wandering he tries life as a black man, living with Negroes. He even fights Negroes who call him white and lives with a woman "black as ebony." Yet he also fights whites who call him a "nigger." Backman

believes that "he provoked them all, white and black, as if he were driven to violence against the others and himself, as if he wanted them to turn against him and break through his baleful sneer into the unbearable aloneness."<sup>42</sup> Until the very end, the community cannot decide for sure what he is; their deep distrust of him grows from his refusal to declare himself one or the other, in a social pattern where this is the most important distinction of all. The murder of Joanna Burden and his own gruesome death are a direct result of Joe's insistence upon being allowed to live suspended between a white and a black identity, choosing whichever causes him the most pain at a given moment. Therefore, he compulsively, consciously and of his own free will devotes his life to a sado-masochistic pattern of action which constitutes a form of retaliation, if not vengeance. As a child he suffers victimization at the hands of his grandfather's pathological religion of white supremacy, as a boy at the hands of his foster-father's narrow Calvinism. But as a youth Joe becomes the rebel who finds expression for his defiance in his affair with Bobbie Allen. His rebellion reaches its climax in the country dance scene where McEachern bursts into the room like the "actual representative of the wrathful and retributive throne" (p. 191). When McEachern strikes at the "face of Satan" he sees in the youth he had raised and sheltered,

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<sup>42</sup>Melvin Backman, Faulkner: The Major Years (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), p. 74.



Joe is quick to retaliate by deliberately swinging a chair at McEachern's head. In the scene of Christmas running away from the scene of his crime, there is definite imputation of choice:

The youth rode lightly . . . exulting perhaps  
at the moment as Faustus had, of having put  
behind now at once and for all the Shalt Not,  
of being free at last of honor and law" (p. 194).

We are not told whether or not McEachern died of the blow but we do know that Joe at last had got the opportunity he had been waiting for and "exulted" in being able to "get even," "I have done it! I have done it! I told them I would!" (p. 194). He also steals Mrs. McEachern's money knowing well that she would have given it to him gladly. This he does only to deal a final blow to the woman who had tried to help him. His involvement with Bobbie is the only time in his life that he has known love and reciprocated it. Bobbie's shrieks of rage on being denounced as a harlot signal the destruction of the last of Joe's spontaneous emotions. Like the dietitian, Bobbie too takes refuge behind the shibboleth and denounces Joe as a Negro. All possible blame and punishment is shifted onto him, as "Negro." He, significantly, has himself provided the material for this accusation. Bobbie has no compunctions about abandoning her "nigger" lover and watching him beaten senseless by her friends. Her religious and racial betrayal impels Joe into the long, lonely street of his life. His refuge is motion. He enters a road that extends for fifteen years, a road of self-flagellation, and of flight from himself.

Joanna Burden is simply a "sewer" (p. 224), a "bottomless morass" (p. 227) who intensifies Joe's sense of defilement and damnation. His murder of Joanna is also deliberate and freely willed. Continually repelled by her praying, which reminds him of McEachern, he is outraged by her efforts to give him ease and security through marriage. "If I give in now, I will deny all the thirty years that I have lived to make me what I chose to be" (pp. 250-251) is his justification. But Joanna, her physical need of him exhausted, sees him as the instrument of her salvation and demands of him that choice which he has spent his entire life evading. She insists that he accept once and for all the role of a Negro and a repentant sinner. But for Joe, to submit his will to her God would be tantamount to denying his whole life of resistance. Each faces the other in weary yet indomitable antagonism, not willing to give in, nor willing to let the other alone. Though Christmas believes that he is the volitionless servant of the fatality in which "he believed that he did not believe" (pp. 244-245) yet his actual act of violence is directed against his grandfather's racial myth, against his foster-father's fanaticism and against woman's corruption as a whole. Joanna's act of raising the pistol and Joe's use of the razor are both shown as shadows against the wall — phantom weapons directed at phantom opponents. Joanna sees in Joe an embodiment of her race's curse and Joe sees in her an embodiment of all the forces that have tortured and destroyed him. However, the main impulse of Joe in committing the murder is self-destruction, because like Joanna,

he too is ready for death. Death, which means total freedom from the impurity, corruption, torment, pain and terror that is life. It thus becomes a longed for boon for Joe.

Ironically, through the commission of murder, Joe gains identity as the "nigger murderer" whom people want to hunt and destroy. Still wrapped in the rags and tatters of his self-sufficiency and pride, Joe slowly works his way away from the violent attack on the Negro church toward his acceptance of his human condition. Rejected, feared and hated he has become what he had sought to become. He desires now to get back into the mainstream of life, to achieve some kind of armistice which will end his inner warfare and give him a sense of peace, of belonging — a sense of roots. It is thence that he seeks out a farmhouse, asks for food in order to be alive, and decides to return to Mottstown and surrender. Neither a "victim of naturalistic forces,"<sup>43</sup> nor a man who simply has things "done to him,"<sup>44</sup> Joe Christmas, in a final thrust of asserting his freedom chooses to circle back. In the words of Longley Jr., "While choice of action remains, he will choose his means of reconciliation."<sup>45</sup> Free throughout life to the very end, Christmas has held on to his life

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<sup>43</sup>Michael Millgate, William Faulkner, p. 47.

<sup>44</sup>Alfred Kazin, "The Stillness of 'Light in August,'" William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism, p. 251.

<sup>45</sup>J. Longley Jr., "Joe Christmas: The Hero in the Modern World," *Ibid.*, pp. 273-274.

until the proper moment has come to give it, the moment to avail himself of that ultimate and masochistic luxury of death at the hands of his enemies.

Like Joe, Joanna's life also presents a complex moral choice. Her father, Nathaniel Burden transforms the physical black and white of skins into moral and religious abstractions. She has learnt to recognise the Negroes "not as people, but as a thing, a shadow in which she lived, we lived, all white people, all other people" (p. 239). The "shadow" becomes a "black cross" which Joanna must bear as a martyr to a great cause. Consequently, her entire life is devoted to perpetuating her father's dictum, "You must struggle, rise. But in order to rise, you must raise the shadow with you" (p. 240). She thus leads a self-immolating existence symbolized by the submergence of her feminine impulses. Her stern devotion to her crusade makes her masculine, thereby transforming her into a bifurcated individual. Thus Joe sees her as "a dual personality: the one the woman, the other the man-trained habit of thinking born of heritage and environment with which he had to fight upto the final instant" (p. 222). Joe's entrance into her life signals an overt conflict between these two aspects of her being. The femininity in her struggles for physical gratification, the masculinity in her offers moral resistance. Ultimately the body conquers the "mantrained habit of thinking," and expresses itself in a desperate and imperious need to experience every possible sensation and every possible emotion that physical love can suggest. Acting out of a world of fantasies, she quickly

passes "through every avatar of a woman in love" (p. 244); the lover's pursuit, secret trysts, baseless accusations, jealousy, seduction and even rape — all are sought and experienced by Joanna.

Yet, Joanna is never free from the twinges of her conscience and seeks to procrastinate the victory of her moral instincts over her sensual ones: "Don't make me have to pray yet. Dear God, let me be damned a little longer, a little while" (p. 250). When her moral struggle is over, Joanna makes a final choice — to plunge herself totally into evil and damnation. Joanna's nymphomania is a reaction to her years of denial to herself and to her devotion to a cause. Her daily routine continues to reflect her polarities of character. In the day she sits man-like at her desk. In the night she wallows in the floods of insatiable desire. She whispers "Negro, Negro, Negro" in the ears of Joe, conscious of damning herself through the very symbol of her salvation. Later, when her sensual instincts are subdued and her racial obsessions intensified, she prays for forgiveness. She also wants the man with whom she has sinned to achieve salvation by assuming the identity of a Negro and by sharing her work to raise the black race. For Joe, Negro and damnation are one, for Joanna, Negro and salvation are fused. Joe's refusal to submit himself to the myth for the sake of which she has lived, makes her resort to violence. She loads her pistol with two bullets — one for Joe so that he may be forced to become the instrument of her salvation, the other

for herself — to bring to a climax the self-immolating instincts of her existence.

It is people like Percy Grimm, self-appointed administrators of moral justice, who would sacrifice the Joe Christmases of the world, gladly secure in the confidence that they are doing their duty. Waggonner feels that "his life opening before him uncomplex and inescapable as a barren corridor" absolves Grimm of the responsibility of making a choice.<sup>46</sup> But Grimm is described as being motivated by "a sublime and implicit faith in physical courage and blind obedience, and a belief that the white race is superior to any and all other races . . . and that all that would ever be required of him in payment for this belief, this privilege, would be his own life" (pp. 426-427). When Grimm appoints himself the officer-in-charge of pursuers, Faulkner's irony blends with sarcasm in pretended praise for the heroic bravery of this young man who, with "only" an automatic pistol, dared to chase that dangerous murderer whose hands were manacled. Following Gavin Stevens' reasoning, Faulkner would have us believe that Grimm's white blood should not have allowed him to shoot the manacled Joe through the table or let him use the knife to castrate Joe. But he deliberately uses both. Therefore, concludes Faulkner, there must have been more black blood than white in Percy Grimm. Translated into ethical terms,

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<sup>46</sup>Hyatt H. Waggonner, William Faulkner: From Jefferson to the World (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1966), p. 118.

it was Grimm's propensity for evil which drove him to the ruthless killing and castration of Joe, as also a definite denial of pity. Since to pity Joe would be to "admit self-doubt and to hope for and need pity himself."

Although Light in August is principally the story of Joe Christmas' struggle to realize human identity, it is also the story of Hightower's crucial moral choice and consequent struggle to realize moral responsibility. Hightower's entire career is devoted to immuring himself safely away from the terrors of the "loud, harsh, world." By electing to escape its terrors, he also denies himself the world's pleasures. He is thus in effect removed from existence itself — living without life. As a boy, he had seen a revealed truth in the vision of his grandfather, compounded of an old Negress' storytelling and his own youthful imagination. Eventually, the only truth for him are the legends of the past, rendering his connection with the present world precarious. Since nothing can compare with his visions of the past, the intercourse of daily life becomes an annoying series of interruptions by the commonplace and the trivial. Hightower's servility to a dream makes him insensitive to the vicissitudes of actual experience. Thus, he ignores the expectations and emotions of his wife. The affection due her has been pre-empted by "the face which he had already created in his mind" (p. 420), believing in his fantasy that his "seed" had died with his grandfather in the Civil War, and that she could have "no part in the assuaging of his hunger." Estranged, by his introversions and by a willed blindness to the needs

of her well-being she finds love elsewhere; and is later driven to suicide by her own shame. Hightower, dominated by his vision of the past stands in the pulpit, fusing religion, the galloping cavalry and his dead grandfather into incoherent rhapsodial sermons, while at the same time remaining sublimely indifferent to his wife's death and to the growing restlessness of his parishioners. Each of his actions becomes a defiance, a calculated incentive to public outrage. Thus he, like Christmas, is responsible for his own isolation and violent ostracism from the parish, the "Gail Hightower Done Damned" (p. 52). Gladly buying immunity from the present, free to devote all his time to the worship of a dead past, Hightower welcomes with "satanic glee," the immurement within his psychic tower, high above the real turmoils of ordinary existence.

Hightower's isolation is sundered by Byron whose life symbolizes commitment and responsibility. Shaken out of his complacency, Hightower is greatly apprehensive of Lena's arrival in Jefferson and of the approaching threat she poses to Byron's freedom and his own isolation. Expressing "shrinking and denial," he struggles to protect himself and his friend (his only contact with living humanity) from commitment, by persuading Byron to steer clear of the girl and run away. Hightower's anguish is that he welcomes as much as he dreads the impregnability of his self-constructed citadel. Byron, sensing this ambivalence, succeeds in persuading him to assist Lena in delivering her baby. Once Hightower does so, he is filled with a sense of extreme exhilaration and hopes that the grateful mother might name her child after him.



Byron's second appeal to save Joe Christmas from the fury of the lynch-mob is much more difficult for Hightower. For though he has "accepted the natural world, he is not prepared to re-enter the social world."<sup>47</sup> Though he feels pity and compassion for Joe and his kind, "poor man, poor mankind," and recognizes the claim of a Negro on white conscience such as his own, he refuses to be drawn into the rituals and pain of social life or to admit any responsibility. This would, he believes, expose the futility of a life devoted solely to the worship of a past dream, a world "intact and on all sides complete and inviolable, like a classic and serene vase, where the spirit could be born anew, sheltered from the harsh gale of living" (p. 419).

"But you are a man of God" reasons Byron. "I am not a man of God. And not through my own desire. Remember that. Not of my own desire that I am no longer a man of God . . . ." Hightower says defensively. "I know that. Because a man ain't given that many choices. You made your choice before that," is Byron's terse retort (p.345). Faulkner's irony is transparently clear. Hightower goes through a process of self-examination and self-condemnation and when the desperate Christmas rushes into his house, Hightower tries to prevent him from being lynched by declaring himself to be with Joe on the night of the murder. Though Hightower does not succeed in saving Joe, he yet experiences for the first time

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<sup>47</sup>Olga Vickery, The Novels of William Faulkner, p. 78.

the entire gamut of human experiences from ecstasy to catastrophe, through his involvement with the two primary events of human life — birth and death.

Hightower now realizes that the past, present and future are one amalgamated whole, as also that he himself is the living personification of his grandfather and the "debaucher and murderer of my grandson's wife" (p. 430). Through the vision containing "a composite of all the faces which he has ever seen," Hightower realizes that no matter how the individual attempts to escape into isolation, the life of each is intertwined with the lives of others. Man is thus, himself responsible for the catastrophe which afflicts himself and others. He concludes, "After all, there must be some things for which God cannot be accused by man and held responsible. There must be" (p. 427).

Faulkner's firm belief in man's free moral choice is further seen in the case of Byron Bunch. A busy man with little time on his hands, he too is an escapist but in a different sense from Hightower. The question of Bunch's aiding and courting Lena (about to give birth to another man's child) poses the dilemma. Her needs threaten to destroy the protective barriers of meaningless routine which Byron has built around himself. He can heed Hightower's advice and flee from the scene, or, "accept the risks of his humanity" and become responsibly involved in a human situation. Byron prefers to respond to his human feelings. Ignoring his southern preconceptions and her present state, he is able to fall in love with Lena. Acting contrary to all the

tradition of his austere and jealous country raising which demands in the object "physical inviolability" (p. 42), he chooses to aid and protect Lena. By thus responding to his conscience, Byron is able to provide security for Lena, rehabilitation for Hightower and help in saving Joe. Even severe critics of Faulkner have conceded Byron absolute freedom of choice. To quote one, "It is not true that all Faulkner's characters are controlled by fate. Byron for one, is left free to choose his own fate."<sup>48</sup>

Like Byron Bunch, Lena Grove too has an essential faith in human goodness. In a delicate condition she hitch-hikes all the way from Alabama to Jefferson, with a determination to find the father of her child, certain in her belief that he will give it a name and a home. With her "inwardlighted quality of tranquil and calm unreason," she is the only victorious character in the book. Despite being abandoned by her lover and condemned by the world, it is her essential faith in goodness and her optimistic confidence in herself which wins her sympathy and help from all. For Mrs. Armstid she is the fallen woman; for the men at the store a foolish girl to be treated with pity and scorn and for Byron the innocent victim of a scoundrel. But she is not troubled by any social or moral categories. Her firm faith is her power and protection. It is her purity of mind which leads Mrs. Armstid to

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<sup>48</sup> Richard Chase, "Light in August," Kenyon Review, 10, No. 4 (Autumn 1948), 543.

offer her food, shelter and money. Hightower disrupts the pattern of his life to attend the birth of her child, drivers offer her free transport and the Sheriff, the right to use the cottage. As for Byron, he offers her marriage, security and love. In the words of Gail Hightower, she is of the "good stock peopling in tranquil obedience to it the good earth" (p. 356). In the ultimate analysis of the book, we can say that Percy Grimm, Old Doc Hines, Hightower, Joanna and Joe become what they are because they wish to be so. Whatever the obsession — pride, hatred, illusion, religion, sex or a searing quest for identity, they themselves, freely and knowingly have willed it into being.

The Wild Palms (1939) continues to develop the theme of moral choice. It portrays the conflict between "the human heart and its environment." Though it is a tragic love story, it yet makes us withhold our sympathy for the lovers because we cannot ignore the "unnatural and sordid elements"<sup>49</sup> in their love, as also the deliberate imposition of their sad fate on themselves. The protagonist, Harry Wilbourne, is marked by his general naivete. He is initially quiet, methodical, unadventurous and performs dutifully his work as a medical intern at a New Orleans hospital. At twenty-seven, he is in a retarded state of adolescence, totally ignorant of "the things he should have known before he was nineteen years

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<sup>49</sup>Edmond Volpe, A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner, p. 214.

old."<sup>50</sup> It is indeed dramatic how a chance meeting with Charlotte transforms this stolid, conventional, infallible young man into a radical rebel, "burning with will." Charlotte Rittenmeyer is married to a successful New Orleans businessman and has two little daughters aged four and two. She has an intellectual lust for a world of pure passion and romance — a love that scorns all compromises, that demands all or nothing, "that will burn forever with a hard and gem-like flame, or, failing that, at least disappear in some final flash."<sup>51</sup> Like Temple in Sanctuary, she is dissatisfied with domesticity and married "respectability" and is yearning to break away from her bourgeoisie world. Innocence and poverty being outside her society, they render Harry particularly romantic to Charlotte. Seeing him, she experiences a strange surging flood of passion, overpowering, irrational and wild. Harry in turn is attracted by her candour, her strong dignity and by the alluring promise of sensual freedom which her yellow eyes hold. He is absolutely swept off by Charlotte's flood of passion, "drowning volition and will in the yellow stare" (p. 39).

During their secret tryst at a cheap hotel, Charlotte feels that secrecy and guilt will corrupt their ideal of love.

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<sup>50</sup> William Faulkner, The Wild Palms (New York: Random House, 1939), p. 214. Subsequent references are to this edition and are cited in the text itself.

<sup>51</sup> Cleanth Brooks, William Faulkner: Toward Yoknapatawpha & Beyond (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 210.

"Not like this, Harry. No back alleys," she declares. Despite her emotional and romantic intensity, Charlotte is shrewd and practical. Since her husband will not give her a divorce and Harry does not have the funds to support both of them, she decides that they terminate their affair. By a strange quirk of Fate, only a few minutes after Charlotte has announced her decision and left, Harry discovers a wallet containing \$1278 in the garbage can. But here the intervention of Fate ends. His first impulse is to return the wallet to the owner whose identification card it contains. He walks to the post office to mail the money to the owner, with "an ascetic's glee" at having saved himself "at least forty-five minutes of time that otherwise would have been filled with leisure" (p. 52). But Charlotte's telephonic effort to finally sever their relations forever leads Harry to act in a different manner. He instantly takes a major decision. He informs Charlotte that they will now be able to leave New Orleans together and set up home elsewhere.

One choice leads to another and all customs and conventions are swept aside, all commitments and obligations abandoned, all ties and connections severed, and love is deified as the only ideal worth living for. This, Faulkner implies, is a mistaken choice, for the lovers are more in love with the idea of being in love, than with one another. The idea of illicit love particularly is a challenge to them because "they have an irresistible desire to . . . take the illicit love and make it respectable . . ." (p. 82). Partly a revolt against bourgeoisie respectability, Charlotte's passion

combines Byronic rebellion with romantic exaltation of love — "I learned what I had read in books but I never had actually believed: that love and suffering are the same thing . . ." (p. 48). Led on by Madame Bovary like yearnings, she wants to experience love so intensely that everything else fades into insignificance. Lesser issues like career, money, children, husband, home or any norms have no place in her romantic imagination:

The value of love is the sum of what you pay for it and any time you get it cheap you have cheated yourself. So I don't need to think about the children (p. 48).

Therefore she decides, "its got to be all honeymoon always. Forever and ever, until one of us dies" (p. 83). Thus, Harry and Charlotte, in their commitment to an ideal decide first to leave New Orleans, then Chicago and finally Utah to preserve their love unsullied from the world, to nourish and keep alive their "dedicated adultery."<sup>52</sup>

The flight of Harry and Charlotte from the patterns of their lives, from the discontent of middle-class society is a flight from the traditional roles of man and woman in society, a flight from life itself. Their sojourns at various places are blind flights to escape from civilization and commitment. Ironically, in their bleak, cold retreat when Charlotte first feels the stirrings of life within her, it is back to civilization that they fly in panic. Harry ineffectually

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<sup>52</sup>Cleanth Brooks, "The Tradition of Romantic Love and 'The Wild Palms,'" Mississippi Quarterly, 25 (1972), 269.

approaches druggists for an aborticide. In his desperation he goes to a brothel to secure a drug. But so awkwardly self-conscious is he, that the madam becomes suspicious of his purpose, summons the bouncer and has him thrown out of her house. Unable to kill the unborn child and wearied by bitter quarrels as also by destitution and struggle, Charlotte pleads with Wilbourne to perform an abortion upon her, "I can starve and you can starve, not it. So we must, Harry" (p. 205). In the light of Harry's moral code, however, the child is a blessing and killing it would be a most terrible crime. In the light of his romantic ideal, he sees the child as a form of nemesis. Like Hester's Pearl in The Scarlet Letter, the baby will be a visible sign of his guilt and sin with Charlotte. He refuses to perform the operation and takes Charlotte to Texas, promising her that if he cannot find work by the fourth month, he would comply with her request. He frantically begins to seek employment but fails. In desperation, he tries to set up as a "professional abortionist" (p. 208), offering to accept cases from licensed physicians, as an ironic alternative to operating on Charlotte. But this too fails. In a frenetic attempt to recapture their idyllic love, Harry and Charlotte flee to New Orleans and the Mississippi coast, back to the wild scaling palms, back to the birthplace of their deteriorating love. Here in the rented beach cottage of a small seacoast village, the lovers flight comes to a final end.

Trying in vain to escape from the bounds of society and nature, they are held back by these very codes. They



succeed in ignoring society but are helpless before Nature. Held to his word, there is little left for Harry but to perform the operation on Charlotte when the time comes. Unable to compromise his moral integrity and make it subservient to Charlotte's ideal of love, he blunders and bungles the operation. Living on illusions of love, he is unable to accept its natural consequence. Yet unable to violate his conscience, "the guardian of the old trained peace and resignation . . . the grim Moses" (p. 35), he cannot destroy human life and in consequence the operation fails. Certain critics feel that Harry's failure lies in his "compulsive need to punish himself and Charlotte for their life of what he has believed all the while to be sin."<sup>53</sup> However, Charlotte remains constant to her ideal till the last moments of her consciousness. She requests her husband not to prosecute Harry "for the sake of all the men and women who ever lived and blundered but meant the best and all that ever will live and blunder but mean the best" (p. 300).

The lyrical beauty of the final chapter should not obliterate the meaning and importance of Harry's final choice of prison over death. Harry refuses bail and rejects suicide — both offered by Charlotte's husband. His decision to remain alive — so contrary to the traditional lover's desire to join his beloved in death, is an expression of despair.

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<sup>53</sup> Joseph J. Moldenhauer, "Unity of Theme and Structure in 'The Wild Palms,'" William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism, p. 313.

He realizes that as soon as both of them die, nothing will remain: "Because if memory exists outside of the flesh it wont be memory because it wont know what it remembers so when she became not then half of memory became not and if I become not then all of remembering will cease to be" (p. 324). The flesh has to be kept alive only to keep love alive a little while longer by remembering. Harry therefore opts for life imprisonment and chooses to cherish and even to nurse the pain of love: "Between grief and nothing, I will take grief" (p. 324).

This study of some of Faulkner's major works, shows that it is the collision of Faulkner's intelligent, sensitive and idealistic protagonists with the society of the twentieth century which detonates the violence, sordidness and brutality of much of the fiction. There are various threats posed to man's freedom in the form of religious righteousness, moral rigidity, taboos, traditions and norms. Faulkner had once said, "man's free will functions against a Greek background of fate."<sup>54</sup> This led critics like Volpe, Millgate, William Brown, Alfred Kazin and others to believe that Faulkner believed in the naturalistic theory. But though Faulkner was aware of the influence of certain circumstantial factors, he believed that man ultimately created his own destiny, for, whereas Nature is amoral, Man is condemned to be moral. Created in the image of God, he has been permitted a share

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<sup>54</sup>William Faulkner, Faulkner in the University, ed., F.L. Gwynn and J.L. Blotner, pp. 38-39.

with Him in advancing or retarding a divine plan, through the performance of freely willed and therefore morally responsible actions. He once said to an interviewer:

I would like to make one [movie] of George Orwell's 1984. I have an idea for an ending which would prove the thesis I'm always hammering at: that man is indestructible because of his simple will to freedom.<sup>55</sup>

When Faulkner said that the only subject worth writing about was the problem of the human heart in conflict with itself, it was a complex metaphor he used. Through the study of Faulkner's fictional characters, we have seen that whatever the type of conflict — glands with conscience (Popeye), flesh with spirit (Joanna), impulse with reason, belief with feeling (McEachern) or abstract idealism with actual experience (Hightower, Harry, Charlotte), it is basically a fight of good (often ineffectual) against evil that is firmly entrenched in the human heart (e.g. Temple). Faulkner's ambivalent vision finds good and evil so inextricably related that they breed their opposites. This vision is given extraneous form in the characters of Joe, Hightower, Horace Benbow and Harry. Each character is basically a morally righteous human being but suffers (as we shall see in the following chapter) because of his inability to sift the good from the evil within, and consequently because of a wrong moral choice.

Faulkner was well aware of the burden which the exercise of free will imposes on a sensitive individual, and he

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<sup>55</sup> William Faulkner, "An Interview" by Jean Stein, William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism, p. 70.

also realized that this burden could not be shifted or got rid of. It is a curse he (man) had to accept from the gods "in order to gain from them the right to dream."<sup>56</sup> He makes a young and troubled character in his final novel say: ". . . suddenly I wanted my mother; I wanted no more of this, no more of free will."<sup>57</sup>

There may be violence, complexity, weariness and a sense of endurance rather than enjoyment in Faulkner; (A critic has even remarked that the study of Faulkner is the "most challenging single task in contemporary American literature for criticism to undertake,"<sup>58</sup>) but we must be alive to the fact that Faulkner leads us to a perfect knowledge of human condition in modern times. With Hawthorne he warns us that redemption lies in moral righteousness; with Melville he asserts the inevitability of human freedom, yet recognizing certain delimiting factors; with Mark Twain he affirms the basic worth in common life; and with Eliot, he tells us that holding to a purely positivistic definition of man leads to a misconception of his actual nature, for, man is an inexorable amalgamation of both positive and negative attributes. Lastly, with Henry James, Dreiser and Wharton, Faulkner asserts that only

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>57</sup>William Faulkner, The Reivers (New York: Random House, 1962), p. 52.

<sup>58</sup>R.P. Warren, "William Faulkner," The New Republic (Aug. 26, 1946), 234-237 rpt. in William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism, p. 124.

moral choices freely made are ultimately significant:

Man is compelled to make choices between good and evil sooner or later, because moral conscience demands that from him in order that he can live with himself tomorrow.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>William Faulkner, "An Interview" by Jean Stein, Ibid., p. 80.

## CHAPTER VI

### TOWARDS EARTH

Nothing persists like the past. Like a hairline crack in the mirror, it continues to cast its shadow on the face of existence, till the very end. The past never leaves man, and in his turn man is forever engaged in meditating on his past, because this alone brings to him the knowledge of his own complicity in his destiny as also a sense of guilt. It is this long nightmare of guilt from which most of Faulkner's characters are trying to escape. But they find that there is no end to the nightmare, because life is limited and guilt is endless. In the labyrinths of the mind there is turning, running, but no deliverance. In the words of Alfred Kazin, ". . . Faulkner is a favorite today because he takes his stand on human guilt . . . this is the side of ourselves that we can recognize, and curiously stand by . . . when men feel so wretchedly small before their own past, they must be guilty. So runs the legend."<sup>1</sup> Guilt indeed is the reflector for Faulkner's moral philosophy, as evidenced in his work. Man bears his destiny in his own character, and his actions and motives shape the contours of his life, except for occasional interventions from nature or the Irrational. With respect to each of his actions, man has free moral choice;

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<sup>1</sup>Alfred Kazin, "The Stillness of Light in August," Twelve Original Essays on Great American Novels, ed., C. Shapiro (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1958), rpt. in William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism, ed., F.J. Hoffman and Olga Vickery (Michigan State University Press, 1960), pp. 259-260.

but once committed, the act becomes the nucleus of an increasingly complex chain of events, the reverberations of which cannot be confined to a single individual. Though his guilt can be passed from one generation to the other, Faulkner believes that man has the choice to either prolong it or expiate it. If the "doomed" man repents for his own sinful choices or errors in judgement he can presumably take the first step toward redemption and the attainment of "Truth":

Truth is that thing, the violation of which makes you writhe at night when you try to go to sleep, in shame for something you've done that you know you shouldn't have done.<sup>2</sup>

It is this discovery of "Truth," the "right to sleep at night," for which we find Temple desperate at the end of Sanctuary and at the beginning of Requiem for A Nun. The woman who committed evil "not for gain, or knowledge or revenge or love or even hate," but because "she liked it,"<sup>3</sup> does indeed pay a heavy price for her preference. Her very name becomes ironical: the "temple" has been desecrated, the sanctuary broken into, but whether the temple had itself not caused its debasement is hardly dubious. Temple's suffering and plea for forgiveness, which is both her desert and her prerogative, is discussed at length in Faulkner's sequel to Sanctuary—Requiem for A Nun. But Temple's later history may or may not have been intended by Faulkner twenty years earlier.

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<sup>2</sup>William Faulkner, Faulkner at Nagano, ed., Robert A. Jelliffe (Tokyo: Kenkyasha Ltd., 1956), pp. 100-101.

<sup>3</sup>Robert L. Mason, "A Defense of Faulkner's Sanctuary," Germanic Review, 21 (1967), 432.

To read it back into Sanctuary would be critically irresponsible. What we find in Sanctuary itself, without keeping Requiem in mind, is that Temple has gone through a moral trauma which has left her unfulfilled, totally corrupt and ethically stultified. Not only is she a physical and moral wreck, but any redemptive quality is totally absent in her. Her election of evil and consequent seduction releases her from the restrictions of convention and society. Her stay at Miss Reba's corrupts her completely. Even Miss Reba and Ruby, the confirmed whores, are shocked by her indifference to values and norms. Her animal-like insistence on physical gratification is indeed tragic. It arouses not disgust but pity for a girl of Temple's potential and possibilities. The debasement is final. Temple has lost the essentially human qualities of moral discrimination, pity, consideration for others or a sense of truth. Above all, she has lost the redeeming quality of love. Red's murder makes little difference to her mentally. It leaves only a physical regret, "that it will never be again."

Temple's perjury in court against Goodwin reveals her absolute indifference to justice or moral obligation. It affects her little if an innocent man is sent to the gallows for a crime she herself led another man to commit. She is even indifferent to the fact that Popeye ought to be punished for leading her to her present plight. Her one and only concern is for herself, her sensual pleasures and her well-being. "The ending of Sanctuary, with Temple sitting 'sullen and discontented' is one of the finest pieces of ironical



writing in all fiction,"<sup>4</sup> for here, the sense of tragedy is all-embracing. It is not the tragedy of Temple, but of man when he becomes devoid of all feeling. The irony is epitomized even in the order of adjectives Faulkner applies to Temple. She is "sullen" and "discontented" before she can be "sad." Any element of the truly tragic or heroic in Temple's sadness is entirely discounted. The strains of music may well be floating in another world, for Temple is cold and empty, incapable of feeling or emotion, like a beautiful figurine carved "in stained marble;" under a sky that is "prone and vanquished" for her, in embrace with the season which spells only "rain and death" for the future.<sup>5</sup>

Popeye, the "link between social and cosmic evil," is, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the embodiment of man's victorious evil impulses. He is interpreted variously as a symbol of Evil Modernism,<sup>6</sup> an "empty tin can,"<sup>7</sup> a physical and psychological puppet and a chronically dangerous psychopath.<sup>8</sup> He is also described as an "asocial, aggressive,

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<sup>4</sup>H.H. Waggoner, William Faulkner: From Jefferson to the World (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1966), p. 98.

<sup>5</sup>William Faulkner, Sanctuary (New York: Modern Library, 1962). Subsequent references are to this edition and cited in the text itself.

<sup>6</sup>George O. Donnell, "Faulkner's Mythology," rpt. in William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism, p. 88.

<sup>7</sup>William Brown, Faulkner's Paradox in Pathology and Salvation: 'Sanctuary,' 'Light in August,' 'Requiem for A Nun,' TSLL, 9 (August 1967), 431.

highly impulsive person who feels little or no guilt and is unable to form lasting bonds of affection with other human beings."<sup>9</sup> What critics fail to perceive is that though his hereditary syphilis and insanity make him incapable of making any kind of meaningful contact with other human beings, such an incapability is willed rather than destined. Popeye's sadism arises from his intense sense of loneliness. He knows that his survival itself depends on accentuating his loneliness — "he will never be a man, properly speaking. With care, he will live sometime longer" (p. 369). Only by eschewing life can Popeye prolong his existence. His killing of Tommy's innocent dog and a pair of love-birds is a deliberate act of revolt against destiny for denying him love. It is also a tragic attempt to gain a sense of life, illusory and elusive as it may be, through the very act of destroying it. The presence of death affirms the reality of life. As for the charge that he is "incapable of any lasting bonds of affection," Popeye's devoted attachment to his mother is ample proof of his capacity for loving. She is his only link with "Good," with the human world and with life itself.

Into this sterile, circumscribed world of Popeye, Temple introduces lust, herself desiring the violation of her purity. Just as death affirms life, evil affirms the existence of good. Popeye's terrible assault of Temple with a corn cob is once again his act of protest against the forces of Good by

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<sup>9</sup>William and Joan McCord, "Psychopathy and Delinquency" (New York: 1956), quoted by Harvey M. Cleckley in American Handbook of Psychiatry, ed., Silvano Arieti (New York, 1959),

conscious election of Evil. His ironical use of the cornucob — a symbol of fertility is an act of revolt against his sterility as well as a wild move to prove to the world that he too is capable of partaking in life's natural processes. His decision to hold Temple a captive and vicariously participate in her gratification with Red points to the same fact. As Joanna Creighton points out, "His aura of putrid deathliness, his impotence — an inability to 'make love' and to create life — and his irreverence finally for even his own life are further evidence of the inherent self-destruction of evil of which Popeye is the macabre emblem."<sup>10</sup>

As for William Brown's contention that Popeye does not suffer intensely<sup>11</sup> or for Volpe's belief that it is impossible to detect any meaning in Popeye's life as a pattern of crime and punishment,<sup>12</sup> one can only say that these critics have failed to see the tragedy inherent in Popeye's life. Crippled by his inability to love, Popeye cannot win any positive emotional response from other human beings — the very idea of such an existence evokes pity in the reader and a sense of dread for such a condition. The only emotional gratification Popeye can experience is the sadistic satisfaction derived

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<sup>10</sup>Joanne V. Creighton, "Self-Destructive Evil in 'Sanctuary,'" Twentieth Century Literature, 18, No. 4 (October 1972), 260.

<sup>11</sup>W.R. Brown, "Faulkner's Paradox in Pathology and Salvation," TSL, 9 (August 1967), 432.

<sup>12</sup>E.L. Volpe, A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner (New York: Noonday Press, 1964), p. 150.

thought or feeling anymore, Faulkner seems to imply. His last words at the public gallows, "Fix my hair, Jack" (p. 378) indicate his total indifference to life or even to death. What more "intense suffering" could a man endure? The choice of evil which Popeye continually makes has led him to a stage where even death seems to elicit no emotional response from him. The fact that he dies like "something filthy flushed down the drain,"<sup>13</sup> or is crushed like "a spider under a vast and mindless boot,"<sup>14</sup> is the height of human tragedy. A life devoid of love and a death devoid of dignity — what more could a writer portray as nemesis?

The reality about women which Horace has avoided for forty three years is dramatized in the adventure of Temple Drake. She has, he realizes, ultimately only responded to the evil that always existed beneath the deceptive trappings of convention and social status. Her perjury in court shatters the illusion which Horace has built around himself that "Law, justice and civilization" will be upheld.

Disillusioned by his society, Horace yet has faith in the power of truth and the law. But he finds that the court too lends itself to the horrifying travesty of justice based on prejudice and emotional bias. Even religion proves hollow

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<sup>13</sup> John L. Longley Jr., "A Study of Faulkner's Heroes," The Tragic Mask (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963), p. 144.

<sup>14</sup> William Faulkner, Requiem for A Nun (New York: Random House, 1951), p. 130. Subsequent references will be to this edition and will be incorporated in the text.

as the church turns viciously on Ruby and her sick child, driving them out into the streets, while God whom Horace believed to be "a gentleman," remains genteelly indifferent to the subversion of His divine laws by human ones. What reduces Horace to a state of shock is the discovery of the shoddy foundations of his vision of a moral and rational universe. The ideal he had believed to be supported and sustained by the institutions of the church, the state and the law is in fact governed by the Belles and Narcissas, exploited by the gangsters and politicians, cheapened by conniving and bribery and brutalized by animalism, murder and lynching.

Critics believe that "the center of 'Sanctuary' does not lie in social criticism or in moral judgement but in horror and despair,"<sup>15</sup> and that the entire novel only expresses the "essence of the human nightmare."<sup>16</sup> I believe that such an attribution of abject despair to Sanctuary is not justified. If life itself is the outrage it seems in Sanctuary, if all our values must in the end lie "prone and vanquished in the embrace of the season of rain and death" as these critics seem to imply, then the author seems to have failed in conveying his message. But this certainly is not the impression Sanctuary leaves on the reader. The vision of despair and disillusionment is generated by society,

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<sup>15</sup> H.H. Waggonner, William Faulkner, p. 91.

<sup>16</sup> William Rossky, "The Pattern of Nightmare in 'Sanctuary' or Miss Reba's Dogs," MFS, 15, No. 4 (Winter 1969-70), 513.

by man himself. Society itself is the destroyer of its own values. The meaningfulness of social institutions is undermined by the manipulative use of them by self-serving individuals, e.g. by the "respectable" cruelty of Narcissa, the calculating ruthlessness of Eustace Graham, the perverse behaviour of the lawyer who knew he could not help Goodwin but still accepted the "payments" Ruby made, the aggressive irrationality in the perverted lust of the mob even before the lynching, and the administration of "justice" in the trial and condemnation of Goodwin.

In Faulkner's fiction "evil" is not merely a violation of social code, but is manifested as lovelessness, as immunity to the dictates of the "feeling heart," irreverence for the needs, sanctity and feelings of fellow human beings. Man's inability to love is demonstrably shown to be the cause of society's inability to minister justice. Irreverence for life is at the heart of society's self-destructive thwarting of its own institutions.

Viable morality — concomitant with reverence and respect for the desires and dignity of others — is an aspect of love. It is therefore an aspect of Good which is life-affirming. Popeye, unwilling to give or receive love therefore chooses to act against morality; hence his pitiable annihilation. However, there is hope for society. Popeye's death rids the society of its "evil" to a large extent, though it will continue to exist. Popeye functions in the novel as a nemesis, exposing the inherent evil in human beings and in their false institutions. "He acts as a

catalyst to bring about their demise."<sup>17</sup> The evil that he embodies manifests itself in every human being, but being capable of moral discrimination, man can defeat it and avert tragedy. Unable to recognize and confront man's capacity for evil, Horace is rendered ineffectual as a defender of "good." However, all hope is not lost. He returns home wondering if something can still be done about the evil inherent in society, in man himself, "A law . . ." (p. 359). As the only character who makes a wise moral choice by deciding to believe in the "good" of life and by fighting for his convictions till the very end, Horace is granted some measure of happiness by Faulkner. He obtains the love of a wife, the respectability of society and the warmth of a home where he may sleep away the "hard nights." He is still capable of feeling the "hardness" of the season and of thinking about the effectiveness of a new law. This feeling and thought of which Horace is still capable — is his measure of success in life.

Both Popeye and Horace are therefore shown by Faulkner to be symbolic figures of evil and good, fused together into the human heart. Popeye is seen only as violent, injuring, hating; in contrast Horace is gentle, protecting, loving. The former is isolated from the world by his total indifference to all moral values, the latter by his dream of moral perfection. Faulkner's moral implications are clear — Horace and Popeye are two possible alternatives from which

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<sup>17</sup>Creighton, "Self Destructive Evil in 'Sanctuary,'" TCL, 262.

in wasteful "tomorrowless days." He establishes his governments to limit and control his freedom so that his tomorrows will be better than his todays.

Ironically the state of crime present in Jackson shows how men have fallen woefully short of the ideal symbolized in the dome. Initially established as a "beacon, focus and lodestar" to provide "in the wilderness, a point for men to rally to in conscience and free will," the golden dome still persists in showing to man the fact that salvation can be achieved by confronting his own conscience, as a first step. The gilded dome embodies man's collective conscience, but human courts only superficially assess moral responsibility. The ultimate justice rests within each individual.

In the third prose section titled, "The Jail," the jail is presented as a symbol of "man's incredible and enduring was." It is also indicative of the community's power, its necessities and its errors. The entire town has been changed by progress but the jail continues to represent

that steadfast and durable and unhurryable continuity against or across which the vain and glittering ephemerae of progress and alteration washed in substanceless, repetitive evanescent scarless waves (pp. 246-247).

Undestroyed, steadfast, it remains the earliest evidence of man's conscious knowledge of his own evil. Its persistent presence in the very centre of the town like a nagging cancer is a constant reminder of man's incredible obtuseness in wilfully refusing to eradicate his own evil. The jail in Faulkner is also a symbol of the belief that the virtuous cannot be separated from the wicked by any law or dogma. The



result is complete chaos in which public morality is confused with virtue, legal immunity with innocence. As Olga Vickery corroborates, "There is no responsibility attached to sin save as it impinges on the legal system. This arbitrary punishment, whether it be imprisonment or death . . . takes the place of conscience, in short, of self-judgement and self-punishment."<sup>19</sup>

Most important, therefore, is the fact that the jail is the symbol of self-judgement. Stripping him of legal or ethical aspects, it brings man face to face with his own guilt, at the same time offering a chance for repentance and renewal. In his enforced solitude, the guilty man receives his only chance to make peace with himself and his God. He can transcend any laws governing him and recover his moral stature, stand "erect and lift his battered and indomitable head" (p. 247).

The dramatic sections of Requiem for A Nun are concerned with the awakening of Temple to the real nature of her past life and with the rise of moral responsibility. As shown in the previous chapter, Temple admits her share in the murder of her baby and accepts moral responsibility for her sins. Unlike the Temple Drake of Sanctuary, she now attempts to purify the human temple by adherence to Truth and by a search for values. In the course of the play Temple assumes responsibility for her act and its consequences. When she thinks

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<sup>19</sup> Olga Vickery, The Novels of William Faulkner, p. 117.

of possible benefits from her confession before the Governor, she knows that it will not help Nancy, it will only be "for the good of my soul — if I have one" (p. 228). Her skepticism about the existence of her soul and of God is very important to an understanding of Faulkner's moral philosophy. If she had believed in God, she could have made her peace with Him through penitence offered by Him to sinners. But by emphasizing her skepticism, the author makes clear that she herself must continue to bear the consequences of her sin.

During the eight years since she jumped off the train, Temple has not had a moment of real happiness with Gowan. Brought together by mutual guilt, they lack mutual understanding and forgiveness. Besides, their guilt slowly keeps corroding their insides. The peace, the quiet, the "no shame" they yearn for, they are not able to achieve. Repentant and magnanimous, Gowan marries Temple to right a wrong. She is grateful for it and hopes to continue giving him the increasing gratitude he requires. When she can no longer do so, she decides to leave him forever. In the years since her marriage Temple has known little else than mental suffering, "not suffering for or about anything, just suffering like somebody unconscious not really breathing for anything but just breathing" (p. 120). Temple's constant fear, moreover, is for her children, whom she does not want to suffer for her sins. She therefore makes a pact with fate, (or, God) in which she promises that if her child is spared from suffering for his mother's past, she will have no other child who too might become a victim of her earlier sins. After the

birth of Bucky, Temple strives hard to keep her part of the bargain employing

one hand to offer the atonement with and another to receive the forgiveness with and a third needed to offer the gratitude, and still a fourth hand more and more imperative as time passed to sprinkle in steadily and constantly increasing doses a little more and a little more of the sugar and seasoning on the gratitude to keep it palatable to its swallower . . . (p. 270).

Her constant preoccupation with atonement and gratitude makes Temple careless toward her part of the bargain. Her pact has been broken and there is to be another potential victim of her past. Temple knows then that she is doomed and waits apprehensively for the form her doom would take:

everyone must pay for your past; that past is something like a promissory note with a trick clause in it which, as long as nothing goes wrong can be manumitted in an orderly manner, but which fate or luck or chance, can foreclose on you without warning (p. 268).

The arrival of Pete, Temple's consequent moral collapse and the murder of the infant by the servant nigger, Nancy, are the forms which Temple's doom takes.

Gowan is unaware of the full extent of his own responsibility until he hears his wife's confession in the Governor's office. He considers the death of his daughter to be a punishment for his sin of eight years ago. He believes he has been given a bitter bargain. He has had to pay for his sin with his "bachelor freedom," with "man's self-respect in the chastity of his wife," and now with the life of a child. Yet he thinks he has got off easily — "Half-price: a child, and a dope-fiend nigger whore on a public gallows: that's all

I had to pay for immunity" (pp. 67-68).<sup>\*</sup> The absurdity and horror of reducing ethical values and emotional ties to a mathematical tally is most horrifying. As Panthea Broughton correctly observes, "Temple and Gowan must come to realize that neither human lives nor human accountability can be tallied on a ledger sheet."<sup>20</sup> Immunity cannot be bought and the past cannot be evaded is Gavin Steven's constant reiteration. In human consciousness, the past and the present are indivisible. They may at any time "foreclose on you" without warning. Thus, Mr. and Mrs. Gowan Stevens realize that they cannot seek penitence by heaping their sins on a scapegoat, Nancy. The Governor cannot prescribe any punishment or absolution for them because they have not sinned against the State or its law but against each other, against their children and against their own humanity. But an admission of their guilt is the first step towards the suffering they must undergo to achieve any satisfaction for the present or any peace for "tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow." Some form of communication, perhaps even of understanding has at last arisen between them.

The spiritual education of Temple Drake has progressed far enough to make her accept the Faulknerian theme of moral continuity but it has not yet progressed far enough to make

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<sup>20</sup> Panthea R. Bronghton, "Requiem for A Nun: No Part in Rationality," The Southern Review, 8, No. 4 (Autumn 1972), 760.

<sup>\*</sup> Please refer Chatto and Windus, 1957 edition for this pagination.

her understand Faulkner's belief that the individual's suffering and penitence is a means to salvation:

TEMPLE: But why must it be suffering? He's omnipotent, or so they tell us. Why couldn't He have invented something else? . . . why can't you buy back your own sins with your own agony? why do you and my little baby both have to suffer just because I decided to go to a baseball game five years ago? . . . What kind of God is it that has to blackmail His customers with the whole world's grief and ruin? (p. 331).

And Nancy's reply may well be Faulkner's own:

NANCY: He don't want you to suffer . . . . But you can suffer. And He knows that too. He don't tell you not to sin, he just asks you not to. And He don't tell you to suffer. But He gives you the chance. He gives you the best He can think of, that you are capable of doing. And He will save you (p. 332).

Temple finds it hard to conceive of such a commitment without guaranteed results and refuses to see that the only guide man needs is the truth of his own heart and the divine peace in his own soul. For that no intellectual conviction, but only faith is needed. The mind cannot be satisfied; Nirvana can be achieved only by subduing the intellect so completely that it no longer requires answers, by subjecting oneself to suffering for one's sins.

Temple lacks the faith to suffer silently for her sins, a faith which Nancy possesses and is therefore saved from a future full of anguish "just for the suffering and paying" (p. 330), which stretches before Temple. Temple knows that she and Gowan will make a home for Bucky but she also knows that her suffering will go on unabated forever. What is even worse is that she will never see the beacon of hope at the

end, for she lacks faith in God who is the Ultimate Good. When she contemplates the future with its successive tomorrows and nobody waiting to forgive her, "Anyone to save it [her soul]. Anyone who wants it. If there is none I'm sunk. We all are Doomed. Damned" (pp. 335-336), we know that she is irremediably lost. Whether Temple ultimately learns to "believe" and thereby achieve salvation, we are not told. But Faulkner's major concern in the book is that the "individual is divinely empowered to make choices between good and evil; and then to find through mistaken choices the kind of suffering which activates the individual's capacity for penitence and regeneration and an earned salvation."<sup>21</sup>

The knowledge which Temple struggles to obtain, Nancy possesses intuitively. She accepts full moral responsibility for her violent act without trying to justify it. Rightly or wrongly she has done what she felt was necessary and she is prepared to pay the full price of her crime both to the Sovereign State and to God. Through her act she has succeeded in stopping Temple from starting yet another pattern of evil to be paid for not only by herself but by her innocent children. With her clear admission of "Guilty, lord," Nancy is not only "disrupting and confounding and dispersing and flinging back two thousand years . . ." (p. 200), but also reaffirming her own moral nature, her own responsibility to law, to herself and to God. By her act she has changed the

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<sup>21</sup>Lawrance Thompson, William Faulkner: An Introduction and Interpretation, pp. 130-31.

course of Temple's life and brought her to grips with reality and with herself.

It is clear that Nancy has her own reasons for feeling that she had made her peace with God before the murder, and that, while an earthly court of justice has condemned her to death, such death is insignificant for her. The only importance it has for her is that it will transfer her being to the realms of eternal life, leading her to salvation. Staking her life for the propagation of "good" in humanity, Nancy embraces death with the calm eagerness of a saint. And Faulkner, as a tribute to her moral choice imputes to Nancy Mannigoe a distinctive sanctity through the title of his book. It is thus that Nancy, the illiterate, "dope-fiend whore" is elevated to become the visible sign of Divine Essence, which Temple is seeking.

Gavin Stevens, the sage of Yoknapatawpha becomes the extension of Horace Benbow of Sanctuary. He is the high-priest who must lead man to self-knowledge, self-judgement, expiation and salvation. His greatest satisfaction in life is that he has to learn while teaching, to be led as well as to lead. It is in this spirit that he seeks to arrive at the realization of Truth, Justice and Goodness. His fulfilment in life is absolute for he has conducted his mission well — the mission of preparing the individual for the ultimate turning around and for being able to face the "brightest blaze of being."

Thus, the major theme in Requiem for a Nun can be said to be the inter-related patterns of continuity — cosmic and

severity but with love, for all of us in some way or the other share the moral guilt of Joe Christmas, as also the responsibility for making him what he is.

Joe's life history has shown us that rejected, feared, hated he has sought and been proud of that rejection and fear; but unable to assume moral responsibility (identity), he has committed a brutal murder. Now he must accept responsibility for the freedom of choice he exerted and pay the price of that freedom. The murder took place on an August midnight. Seven days of incessant flight went by before Joe decided to surrender. His flight was like a nightmare that illustrated the dark and painful allegory of his life. He fled through the alternating spaces of day and night as though he were running back and forth between the black and white worlds that divided him and his society, running from one to the other, and rejected by both, running nowhere. He was always running — with no rest, no peace. There was the time he broke into the Negro church, mounted the pulpit, mouthed blasphemies against the God who created him and his like. But we find that at last the body's need for food and rest puts an end to his flight. Completely overpowered by the need for roots as well, he for the first time sees his life not merely in terms of "black" and "white" but simply as human. He thus decides to seek human reconciliation by getting back into the mainstream of feeling, pulsating life. He waits in the dawn for a farmhouse to come alive and the men to leave for their fields. His pathetic question to ~~the~~ them is "Can you tell me what day this is? I just want to know what day this



is" (p. 319)\*. Even though the white woman sends him away, Faulkner's symbolism succeeds in striking the reader — Joe wants a chance to begin life anew by accepting the limitations of one of the most human and communal inventions-time. Next he approaches a Negro cabin to ask for a meal. Contrary to his earlier desire for death, this is a positive expression of his wish to live, to find roots. "That was all I wanted . . . . That was all for thirty years. That didn't seem to be a whole lot to ask in thirty years" (p. 289).

But his new-found awareness of himself simply as man causes him to be rejected by both the Negroes and the Whites because "He never acted like either a nigger or a white man. That was it. That was what made the folks so mad" (p. 306).

Ironically, after the murder, Joe puts on a pair of black work shoes borrowed from a Negro, and as Faulkner would have us believe, assumes the identity of a black. He looks at the black of his shoes ". . . moving upward from his feet as death moves" (p. 321). And he attains the inner peace which follows cessation of a struggle. No one had ever been able to compel him to choose, black or white; the murder was the result of that refusal. Dazedly he realises that he has given himself up to the world by his act and that he can no longer refuse the role it has given him to play — that of a repentant sinner, black as sin. Recognizing also the "black abyss" yawning within him, he decides to surrender himself in Mottstown — "I am tired of running, of having to carry my life like it was a basket of eggs," he says in desperation (p. 319). On way to surrender we see Joe shaving himself carefully with

\* Refer William Faulkner, Light in August (London: Chatto and Windus, 1960). Subsequent references are cited in the text.

his razor — seeking rehabilitation and acceptance through the very instrument with which he had earlier sought freedom and rootlessness. "Had he chosen sooner" says Longley "or had he merely gone away as he was also free to do, Joanna Burden would not be dead and he would not be about to die."<sup>22</sup> As surely as he sees the blackness (his acceptance of Negro status) creep up his body, he feels his body sinking into the darkness, the extinction of death. He walks about the streets of Mottstown resignedly, waiting to be captured: "I have never got outside that circle. I have never broken out of the ring of what I have already done and cannot ever undo" (p. 321).

As Gavin Stevens says it was perhaps the "conflict in his blood" which made him run, yet seek capture. He snatches up the pistol but cannot kill Grimm with it: this is his final assertion of identity, of the "white," the good within him. It is also a passive acceptance of Divine Retribution. Grimm is indeed symbolic of the classic Nemesis or the Furies — machine-like, unerring, mindless, impersonal. Grimm ruthlessly empties the magazine of the automatic into Joe's body and there is even more to follow. In an unforgettably lurid scene Faulkner describes Grimm's castration of Joe while the latter is drawing his last breaths. In the final agonizing moments of his life,

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<sup>22</sup> John L. Longley Jr., "Joe Christmas: The Hero in the Modern World," rpt. in William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism, p. 274.

he just lay there, with his eyes open and empty of everything but consciousness, and with something, a shadow about his mouth. For a long moment he looked up at them with peaceful and unfathomable and unbearable eyes. Then his face, body, all, seemed to collapse, to fall in upon itself, and from out the slashed garments about his hips and loins the pent black [irony apparent] blood seemed to rush like a released breath . . . (pp. 439-440).

Free at last of the conflicts of society and self, Joe dies — embittered, mutilated, alone and unredeemed.

The death of Christmas is not without further significance. It is intended as a rebuke to society, a reproach to the inhumanity that lives in the heart of a society divided by race and religion. The killing of Joe has not left the persecutors with a sense of purgation, but only with a feeling of their own guilt and self-doubt. Doc Hines, McEachern and others misused their religious privileges by using Joe as an instrument of salvation and later as a scapegoat to heap their own sins upon him. They crucify him so that they may obtain the satisfaction of vicarious expiation. But they have crucified their own religion and humanity too. Joe Christmas, lynched and castrated as Negro, rapist and heretic thus becomes a symbol of society's racial, sexual and religious sins. However, it is none of these, but "the man," one of their own kind who rises "soaring into their memories forever and ever" (p. 440).

Light in August, therefore, much more than any other book of Faulkner, induces in us a deep feeling of catharsis. Pity arises because Joe is a victim of religion, racism and mythical beliefs, of moribund codes and false religious

dogmas, of social discrimination and warped conscience —

"When will men that have different blood in them stop hating each other?" Joe asks and though we do not know the answer to this question, we do know that people like him will continue to suffer for our sins. Being human, we too are guilty of racism, fanaticism and oppression, and thus indirectly responsible for Joe's tragic end. Terror arises because like us Joe was a man. And as in Joe, there is a light-dark opposition that is in the blood of all of us, a savage pull between bright rationality and bestial instincts. And the choice rests with us.

Joanna Burden also experiences a complex nemesis like Joe. Her devoted adherence to her cause is noteworthy, but what is reprehensible is the cause itself. Considering the black race to be "worth saving" is acknowledging it as inferior, which in Faulkner's ethical system is also a sin. Hence the price Joanna has to pay for belief in the "cause" is isolation in a hostile community. But the greatest mistake of her life is a deliberate, unbridled indulgence in her sensual desires, knowing herself to be "damning" all the while. She elects to sin only because she wants to experience damnation to its "hilt" before life comes to an end. She voluntarily seeks an opportunity for damnation before one for salvation is granted her. Once she attains physical gratification, she sees all the facets of her relationship with Joe in the light of her old "mantrained habits of thinking" and the result is a reaffirmation of Calvinism and rededication of herself to the black cross. Satiated by sin, she is left free to brood

over her salvation. Being her instrument of defilement and damnation, Joe is chosen by her as the obvious symbol of salvation. She pleads, bribes and threatens him to act her concept of the Negro. Used to the categories of "black" and "white," she cannot accept any other. Gray baffles her. Translated into moral terms, she can think of herself and Joe only as sinners, still to be redeemed. She cannot conceive of themselves as simply human. She compels Joe to ignore his own uncertainty, to admit his black blood (his sinfulness) and his dependence for salvation on her and her God. Joe's refusal to surrender to that myth for the sake of which she had lived a self-denying existence all these years and for the sake of which she still continues to draw breath, threatens the collapse of the myth itself. She reacts to his recalcitrance with violence, determined to make him agree and thence to achieve salvation through him by killing both of them in the name of her cause, her God. Joe's brutal murder of her with a razor is in a way her tragic desert. Destroyed by the very instrument of her possible salvation, she dies baffled, defeated, unredeemed. Complete denial of even the promise of salvation exposes the tragic futility of a life devoted to a cause as also the hollowness of the cause itself.

Hightower's struggle toward accepting life with all its oppositions is as important a theme in Light in August as that of Joe's quest for an identity. Both seek in their own ways to become human. For Hightower their meeting represents the

climax of his moral dilemma, for Joe, his last act of defiance. They fail to save Joe between them, Joe (himself) because he cannot seek mercy even in his last hour (thirty years of resistance and rebellion do not permit him to); Hightower fails to save Joe because he has been residing for years in the past and is unable to cope with the exigencies of the present. Although Hightower does make a valiant attempt to save Joe, he is unable to influence the lynch mob in anyway, because too much has happened since the day he abandoned his chosen calling. The past is irremediable.

Jarred out of his complacency and self-righteousness by Joe's death, Hightower sees his past with a new clarity. He sees that he has been "wild too in the pulpit," using religion as though it were a dream. In the process he had got his romantic idolization of the past and his religion all mixed up, using perhaps even his wife as a means to the end of his self-inflicted martyrdom. He realizes that he had failed his parishioners, his calling and his wife because he would not establish any contact with them on a human, personal level. Confrontation of truth alone does not, cannot, bring Hightower peace, because peace comes of accepting life with all its vicissitudes, not through thought alone. Through such an intellectual confrontation as Hightower experiences, the mind always moves to insoluble ultimates. It is now that he wants to pray, not as a minister, for peace and salvation, but as a sinner, for forgiveness and mercy. The motionlessness of Hightower sitting "rigidly" behind his desk, "his forearms parallel upon the armrests of the chair," indicates his

inability to pray. Filled with a sense of denial and spiritual vacuum, he finds it difficult to redeem himself, let alone humanity.

Severely critical of the dereliction of Hightower's moral responsibility to his wife, his people, himself and God, Faulkner yet holds out some glimmering hope of redemption for Hightower. This is offered when Hightower finally assumes responsibility and chooses to participate in life's creative processes by deciding to deliver Lena's baby. In the freshness of the dawn, after the baby is born, Hightower feels that he is in touch with earth again. Earth — the symbol of rightness, authenticity, life and light. His ties with humanity are restored and by this act he has brought back dignity and stature to his life.

One of the two characters in Light in August who make a correct moral choice is Byron Bunch. He finds through his own effort the motives for morality and consequent fulfillment in life. His choice of "accepting the risks of humanity," and offering protection to Lena provides "a repose for the meaningless drift of his earlier life."<sup>23</sup> His desire to protect Lena, to convert Hightower and to save Christmas gives him a certain dignity and courage which was lacking in his isolated safety of emotionless routine. It also gives promise of being a sufficient shield against whatever catastrophes life may have to offer — "a man [who] can just about

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<sup>23</sup> Richard Chase, "The Stone and the Crucifixion: Faulkner's 'Light in August,'" Kenyon Review, 10, No. 4 (August 1968), 540.

definition of characters as humans, not as "aberrations." There is also the test of character presented through the individual's moral choice and through his response to consequences: the hatred, lust and violent expiation of Joe, the flight from responsibility and resultant atonement of Hightower, the humble acceptance of ostracism and condemnation by Lena and her final happiness. There is also hope for redemption and definite indication of "new spiritual life"<sup>25</sup> through the birth of Lena's baby, through the hope which this birth brings to the world and through the promise of love with which he will be reared. He, we are sure, will be raised on a living religion based on the "eternal verities of the heart," not on petrified Calvinistic catechisms. He will, we may be certain, not be torn by anguish and uncertainty for he will be brought up with an unswerving faith in goodness as a code and in himself as a man. Light in August concludes "with this emphasis on new life and the seeming tragedy of the novel is transfigured into hope for the future."<sup>26</sup>

The essential theme of The Wild Palms (1959), is apparently that moralistic non-conformity for the sake of itself does not ensure happiness. After Harry and Charlotte have left their career and home respectively, they are free of any binding commitments. Free of society, free to enjoy in the

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<sup>25</sup> Richard Chase, The American Novel and its Tradition (New York, 1957), p. 219. Chase asserts that there is no spiritual life in Light in August.

<sup>26</sup> P.L. Hays, "More Light on 'Light in August,'" Papers on Language and Literature, 11 (1975), 419.



luxury of privacy, their ideal Eden, Charlotte underlines the blessed solitude by addressing Harry as "Adam." But Harry is a fallen Adam living in a lost paradise. Unable to sustain the burden of Edenic bliss, he soon realizes that he is "bored, bored to extinction."

Even at the beginning of his adventure with Charlotte, Harry reveals the inherent sense of guilt which later leads to his tragic end. On the train to Chicago, he reflects upon the morality of his deeds, and while he tries to maintain his disbelief in "sin," the sense of oncoming punishment as a consequence of non-conformity to moral codes is evident:

You are born submerged in anonymous lockstep  
with the teeming anonymous myriads of your  
time and generation, you get out of step  
once, falter once and you are trampled to  
death.<sup>27</sup>

But Charlotte fails to see anything impure in this love and wants them to consummate it immediately as a symbolic repudiation of conventional society and its inherited burden of remorse. But Harry while following her down the aisle to a compartment cannot rid himself of a surrounding "aura of unsanctity" (p. 60).

Their residence at Chicago cannot reconcile Harry to his "guilt." Charlotte tries to convince him that love is a divine gift they have to accept "Either heaven, or hell, no comfortable safe peaceful purgatory between for you and me to wait in until good behavior or forbearance or shame or

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<sup>27</sup>William Faulkner, The Wild Palms (New York: Random House, 1939), p. 54. Subsequent references to the book will be to this edition and will be stated in the text.

repentance overtakes us" (p. 83). In terms of Harry's preconceptions however, love is an appetite, a shameful flaw, "It doesn't die; you're the one that dies" (p. 83). Try as he would, his very consciousness makes it impossible for him to accept illicit love as a divine gift. McCord who admires Charlotte's ideals admonishes Harry to "Stop thinking about yourself and think about her for a while" (p. 101). He takes them to a primeval cabin on a Wisconsin lake in idyllic surroundings. While Charlotte is to some extent happy, Harry cannot rid himself of a nagging sense of guilt and impurity. He even resents nature for conspiring against him in order to render him unaware of his moral position:

I have been seduced to an imbecile's paradise by an old whore; I have been throttled and sapped of strength and volition by the old weary Lilith of the year (p. 114).

Harry spends most of his time sleeping and when awake he lies on the bed thinking, "not even thinking but merely existing in a drowsy and fetuslike state" (p. 110). But "fetuslike" submission to Charlotte's desire soon becomes unbearable for Harry. He can neither experience physical fulfillment nor can he summon enough courage to leave her: "Without an organizing moral equation, the relationship has become meaningless for him."<sup>28</sup> Unable to return to prelapsarian innocence he finds it impossible to endure "the sunny and timeless void into which the individual days had

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<sup>28</sup> Joseph J. Moldenhaver, "Unity of Theme and Structure in 'The Wild Palms,'" William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism, p. 311.

vanished" (pp. 113-114). His immediate concern is to know what day of the year it is and he proceeds to construct a calendar and thus locate himself once more in temporal relation with the world. The diminishing rows of cans on the shelf has its own desperate implications. Man cannot live on love alone. Thus, Harry pleads to Charlotte to return to Chicago where McCord has a job for her, while he can enjoy the hermit's limited bliss, sheltered from the temptations and appetites of the mind and the body: "There is nothing here that I am needed for. Not even by her. I have already cut enough wood to last until Christmas and there is nothing else for me to do" (p. 113). "What a sad thought," says Volpe "for a man who has given up all for love!"<sup>29</sup> It never occurs to Harry that he can replenish their larder, by fishing or even hunting.

The endeavour to live only for love and by love, free from the delimiting codes of society, having failed, they return to Chicago driven by the need to earn bread and to do something. They compromise with the society they detest to the extent of getting jobs. Charlotte dresses windows. Harry finds that he can make money by writing confession stories and also obtain vicarious expiation by doing so. He pursues this occupation with zest and intensity as a means of shamefully recording his own preoccupations with sin, and by making them public indulges in the exhibitionist's

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<sup>29</sup> Edmond L. Volpe, A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner (New York: Noonday Press, 1964), p. 226.

self-degradation. He writes while Charlotte sleeps and retires when she arises, adding celibacy to exhibitionism. With a shock of horror, Charlotte realises that they are subsiding into the very middle-class respectability, from which they had fled. Meanwhile Harry is unable to bear the burden of respectability, for he has been provided by the city a "routine even of sinning, an absolution even for adultery" (p. 126). Hence they decide to flee Chicago once more, this time for a mining camp in Utah.

Here, in Utah, their plight is even worse than it was in the Wisconsin cottage. In Wisconsin despite threats of starvation and winter, they had had solitude and love. But now their love dies a forced death as the intense cold compels them to sleep with another couple in order to keep themselves from freezing. In coming to the wilderness of the frozen mining camp, Charlotte and Harry had taken a desperate step to keep their idealistic love pure but they find that "they have taken the world into bed with them."<sup>30</sup> Hence they spend the winter in "married chastity." Faulkner insists throughout the book that though it assumes idealistic proportions, their love is basically sensual and erotic, not idealistic and spiritual. Concentrating on the transcendental aspects of their love, they totally ignore the physical and natural consequences of love. When Charlotte learns of her approaching motherhood, she is averse to

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<sup>30</sup> Cleanth Brooks, "A Tale of Two Innocents," William Faulkner: Toward Yoknapatawpha and Beyond (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 218.

accepting the responsibility. Though at heart Harry wants to be a husband and a father as he unwittingly admits to McCord, "My wife must have the best" he is helpless before Charlotte's dedication to ideal.

Failing to find employment to support "his wife and child," he decides on an aborticide, and failing to procure even that, he yields to Charlotte's persuasion to operate on her. Unable to escape or obey his conscience, Harry follows a course of frenzied self-punishment which culminates in the operation getting bungled. In sheer desperation at his inability to defeat nature or death Harry rushes to the landlord doctor. The "doctor in the Doctor" wants to offer professional help but the "Baptist in the Doctor," zealous to perceive moral violation, hesitates. The horror and revulsion at the attempted abortion on his own beloved makes the doctor turn in disgust upon Harry — "I thought you were the lover. There are rules! Limits! To fornication, adultery, to abortion, crime . . . . To that of love and passion and tragedy which is allowed to anyone lest he become as God who has suffered likewise all that Satan can have known" (p. 280). In his unwilling proximity to these great sins, the doctor suggests what Charlotte had told Harry before their tragic adventure: that for the selfless lover there is a basic connection between love and total moral dedication, that "love and suffering are the same thing and that the value of love is the sum of what you have to pay for it and any time you get it cheap you have cheated yourself" (p. 48). Attempting to get love "cheap," i.e., without wanting to accept concomitant

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responsibilities, Charlotte and Harry have cheated not only themselves but each other. Dedicated to her ideal, Charlotte yet wants to evade moral responsibility and Harry subconsciously seeks atonement for his sins through inflicting suffering on himself and Charlotte.

Though said to typify the conventional and barren man which Harry otherwise may have become, the doctor serves as the author's spokesman, by assuming the role of the narrator. He also serves as a representative of those very moral scruples which prevent Harry's happiness as well as that of Charlotte:

though not old yet he believed he was too old  
for this, too old to be wakened at midnight  
and dragged, haled, unwarned and still dull  
with sleep, into this, this bright wild  
passion which had somehow passed him up when  
he had been young enough, worthy enough, and  
to whose loss he believed he had not only  
become reconciled but had been both fortunate  
and right in having elected to lose (pp. 43-44)  
(emphasis mine).

It is this same preoccupation with a fixed moral and social order which lies behind Harry's incapacity to enjoy the pagan freedom with Charlotte, behind his masochistic, self-inflicted sorrows, and behind his final eager acceptance of the sentence pronounced by the outraged court.

Harry himself becomes the means of Charlotte's and his own destruction. While she thrashes about violently in pain, he stays by her side, watching helplessly the "thread of blood" along Charlotte's mouth and the blood dripping from her wounded womb. This scene signifies death in all its devastating, despairing, demanding form. Backman too finds the entire scene to be pervaded by a sense of covert shame

theoretical ideals. In practice man cannot deceive himself, let alone nature or society, as the lovers' efforts at abortion and isolation prove.

Ironically, however, the lovers are not destroyed by either of the forces they feared but by love for which they risked life itself. It is love itself that makes Harry bungle the operation and accept life imprisonment. A sense of false escape from the confines of norms thus leads to an ultimate, still more confining imprisonment. Society and nature signal their inevitable victory over the illusory aspirations of the individual. Faulkner is not against assertion of values in a "dead" society, but what he finds wrong is man's overemphasis on freedom at the expense of moral obligations and commitments. Born into a specific time and place, into a world already shaped by tradition, the individual must preserve that part of his heritage which sustains life and reject that which destroys it. Moral choices are often difficult and, once made, affect all succeeding ones. The balance between reason and impulse, between freedom and restraint is a precarious one, but its correct poise alone ensures integrity and fulfillment.

Faulkner has often obscured his moral beliefs behind clouds of symbolism, imagery and rhetoric. This has misled critics into believing that Faulkner is one of the avant-garde novelists who think existence to be meaningless and man to be the "victim of a practical joke."<sup>33</sup> But my analysis

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<sup>33</sup> Edgar W. Whan, "Absalom! Absalom! as Gothic Myth," Perspective, Vol. 3 (Autumn 1950), 201.



of Faulkner's characters, plots and action has shown beyond doubt that according to Faulkner it is man who creates his own evil. To use his own words — "The most important thing is insight — that is, to be — curiosity — to wonder, to mull and to muse why it is that man does what he does."<sup>34</sup> When we "muse" and "wonder" with Faulkner, we discover that "man does what he does" because:

- (i) he does not want to be chained to the dogmas and taboos of his society. He wishes to rise above them, by asserting his individuality, what Faulkner calls the central "I Am" of his being. And he does so by challenging those very traditions and norms and by rising in rebellion against them. The tragedy is that he is torn and twisted by his rebellion and humiliated before the strong bonds of society. Temple Drake, Harry and Charlotte are examples of this kind of rebellion.
- (ii) Man asserts his freedom when he feels he cannot endure and will not accept the ambiguity of his moral situation. Ahab-like in his scorn of all petty satisfactions and virtues, the Faulkner character attempts to "strike through the mask" to get at absolute truth for good or for ill. This search for truth or identity drives him to every degradation and finally to his own destruction. The best example of

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<sup>34</sup> Faulkner in the University, eds., F.L. Gwynn and J.L. Blotner (Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 1959), p. 191.

this "idealism" is Joe Christmas.

- (iii) Another cause of moral revolt is man's desire to do what he thinks is good, by rising above dogmas. In doing so he hopes to come nearer God and attain salvation. Examples of this revolt are Nancy Mannigoe, Joanna Burden, Doc Hines, McEachern and Percy Grimm. In each case the ends are of much more significance than the means. In some of these instances, religious instinct is forced into the Calvinistic credo in the name of which Ruby Lamar's child is threatened with damnation, Joe Christmas is persecuted and the Negro is condemned to eternal servitude by such men as Nathaniel Burden. Acting in conformity to a particular social code blinds these characters to the true ethical significance of their action. Men like McEachern, Hines and Grimm are moral cripples who have confused a system of beliefs with reality. It is such individuals who control churches and "who have removed the bells from its steeples," so that they have become "like one of those barricades of the middle ages planted with dead and sharpened stakes against truth and against that peace in which to sin and be forgiven is the life of man."

When an individual like Harry, Charlotte or Hightower translates a personal ideal into a pattern of behaviour, he rejects life by substituting private conviction for truth. By confronting his illusions in the guise of dreams, reiterated legends or rational convictions, he renders himself

incapable of meeting the demands of the external world. Faulkner considers such a choice to be wrong — no dream or ideal can be substituted for reality. Cherished at the expense of life and moral norms, these "ideals" are destroyed the moment they are put to the test of experience. Harry and Charlotte are destroyed by their ideals, and Hightower misses out the joys of life for the same reason.

Faulkner's characters are doomed forever if they lack the necessary resilience to admit and rectify their errors. Acceptance of suffering and penitence often restores happiness to them:

A gentleman accepts the responsibility of his actions and bears the burden of their consequences, even when he did not himself instigate them, didn't say No though he knew he should. A gentleman cries too but he always washes his face.<sup>35</sup>

Thus we see that though torment, despair and suffering are the inevitable contents of a Faulkner work, they are balanced by the virtues of endurance, dedication, penitence and love: "You must never use the evil for the sake of the evil — you must use the evil to try to tell some truth which you think is important. There are times when man needs to be reminded of evil, to correct it, to change it . . . ." <sup>36</sup>

Lena and Byron live in the same world as Joe but they represent the ideal alternative to Joe. Temple Drake's and

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<sup>35</sup> William Faulkner, The Reivers (New York: Signet, 1962), p. 221.

<sup>36</sup> William Faulkner, Interview in Japan, 1955, quoted by Thompson, William Faulkner: An Introduction and Interpretation, p. 176.

Joe's moral choice results in a saga of anguish but Lena and Byron along with Horace Benbow and Gavin Stevens illustrate what happens when by an act of will one decides to believe in fundamental human goodness, in the possibility of human improvement and in the essential oneness of man. In the words of Professor O'Dea,

Faulkner writes of violence, of human stupidity, of cruelty, of greed, of a brooding sense of evil in the universe, but in the midst of all this dark turmoil gleams a light, a hope that although most men fail yet they are not doomed to failure and that in spite of all their petty vices and stupidities they will prevail.<sup>37</sup>

What is particularly impressive about Faulkner is the awareness he creates in his readers not only of the conflicts in the human heart but also of the possibilities for greater harmony through reconciliations of these opposed drives. As he declared in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, he has a strong faith that man can "endure and prevail and last," because he believes not only in the right of man to be "free of injustice and rapacity and deception but [in] the duty and responsibility of man to see that justice and truth and pity and compassion are done."<sup>38</sup> It is a belief which involves the necessity of man's aspiration to remake the world nearer to the heart's desire, of believing always

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<sup>37</sup>Richard O'Dea, "Faulkner's Vestigial Christianity," Renaissance, 21 (Autumn 1968), 44.

<sup>38</sup>William Faulkner, Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, December 10, 1950.

that he can be better than he probably will,"<sup>39</sup> of "creating Paradise here and now in a world that is Eden if only we will see it and love it and in which man is either the creative or the destructive force depending on the choice he makes."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>William Faulkner, quoted in Thompson, William Faulkner, p. 176.

<sup>40</sup>Joseph Gold, William Faulkner: A Study in Humanism from Metaphor to Discourse (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967), p. 10.

## CONCLUSION

### THOUGH TO SOAR WERE SALVATION

On analysing closely the theme of moral choice in significant works of fiction, we come to the conclusion that it is part of the tragedy of living a human life and part of the glory of being human that man is capable of being tempted by evil and can yet struggle against that temptation. The anguish of the soul that such struggle involves is the token of the knowledge that morality is better than unabashed fulfillment of worldly aspirations.

Wharton, Dreiser and Faulkner individually and collectively paint various portraits of man caught in the tragic contest between impulse and duty. Such portraits serve to heighten the stature of man as a tragic hero and reveal his immense moral dimensions. All three writers crusade for individual freedom of action. Man, for them is no plaything for whimsical natural forces to dally with, nor is he to be lost irremediably in the labyrinths of a Kafkaesque existence from which no meaning derives. He is, for each of these writers, the conscious architect of his own destiny. For Wharton, man can and should rise above the repressing restraints of tradition. He must, by spreading his wings, test the air-pressure, soar a little above others, but not beyond certain limits. He will ultimately find shelter and security in the "mere wisp of leaves and straw so put together that the lives entrusted to it may hang safely over the

abyss"<sup>1</sup> of temptation and turbulence. For Dreiser choice is essential and imperative but not total. Hence the corollary that though man chooses his own future, he can commit sin often through omission rather than commission. Man is equally culpable if he commits a wrong in word or thought as he is if he commits it in deed. Dreiser often makes subconscious volition a reality through accidental factors as in the tragedy of Clyde and Roberta. Though the boat is not directly upset by Clyde, he is the undoubted culprit, for he had already committed the murder in thought. The same is the case with Hurstwood's larceny. However ruthless or intelligent the struggle, man might be defrauded by sheer accident. Chance seems at times to have the final sway. It plays a significant though usually an unobtrusive role in Dreiser's plots, which is to say that unpredictable and coincidental occurrences affect the development and outcome of events in a proportion likely to seem consistent with that of ordinary life, and therefore do not seem contrived. Man is the ultimate creator of his future. We may say that Dreiser's philosophy with reference to free-will stands midway between Hawthorne's conformity to conventions and Hardy's concept of the Immanent will on the one hand and Zola's Naturalism and Melville's defiance of authority on the other. For Faulkner, moral choice is an inevitable absolute. A denial of the freedom of will would mean a total "devitalization of

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<sup>1</sup>Edith Wharton, House of Mirth, p. 319.

which in turn is curbed by the puritanical assertion of responsibility in Wharton's fiction. For Dreiser too, personal aggrandisement or personal acquisitiveness is always dangerous, destructive and degrading. As Whipple says, in Dreiser's world "those are happiest on the one hand whose instincts are most primitive and on the other whose aspirations are feeblest; the former get the most, the latter ask the least."<sup>4</sup> The only delight this "wild struggle to get what each can out of the general grab-bag" offers is the ever-increasing animalistic delight of a stockbroker at having acquired the maximum number of shares in a lucrative market or a millionaire's juvenile pleasure at having outbid his rivals at an auction. It cannot give any lasting happiness. One cannot fail to remember that poignant episode in which Cowperwood confesses to Stephanie that his hunger for life increases with age but men have begun to judge him at their own value. He must accept less from life because he has surged beyond its traditional limitations. As for Faulkner, what he said of Hemingway may as well be true of himself; "Dreiser is his older brother and Mark Twain the father of them both."<sup>5</sup> His view of the world is the saddest of all, for a world given over to practicality, rapacity and evil is inevitably a tragic world. According to Warren Beck, Faulkner's

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<sup>4</sup>Thomas K. Whipple, "Aspects of a Pathfinder," The Stature of Theodore Dreiser, p. 104.

<sup>5</sup>Faulkner quoted by Jean Stein, "William Faulkner," Paris Review, 4 (Spring 1956), 52.



continuous theme is that "man when passion-ridden and irrationally seeking privilege or sensation or escape, plunges on toward stultification and tragedy."<sup>6</sup> Popeye, Temple, Joe, Harry and Charlotte exemplify this theory.

At a time when America faced railroad strikes and Populist riots, when in its Southern parts slavery and forced miscegenation were juxtaposed, when the lush green of its countryside mutely gave way to grey concrete of industry, when capitalism saw wealth burgeon with the "waste" of morality, these writers clamoured and crusaded for moral life. The luxury that had nourished Edith Wharton and given her the opportunities of a genteel novelist, unfortunately cheated her of her immense strength and verbal power. It often compelled her to withdraw from the reality of the world in which she lived. Having the passion of feeling, she lacked the passion of words. Theodore Dreiser had no such inhibitions. He did not content himself with the facile telling of a pretty story, with the frills of rosy decorations. His dire poverty and hard life robbed him of all ostentation. His lusty, forceful style and granite-like honesty matched the hideous, sordid, squalid conditions and passionate aspirations he witnessed and experienced and sought to expose. Faulkner's rhetoric, "perhaps the most elaborate, intermittently incoherent and ungrammatical

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<sup>6</sup>Warren Beck quoted in Edward Wagenknecht, Cavalcade of the American Novel, p. 423.

thunderous, polyphonic rhetoric in all American writers . . .,"<sup>7</sup> is also a means of communicating the violence, the sense of outrage at the prevalent sense of evil in his world. Though he has lost many admirers because of his "eccentric manner," Faulkner has nevertheless succeeded wonderfully in conveying his belief that though inherently selfish and evil, we can better our condition because we have a desperate urge "to seek to endure."

A common feature in the treatment of the theme of moral choice in Wharton, Dreiser and Faulkner is that all the three writers lay great stress on the inextricable justice of Conscience. Whether a Clyde is hanged for his choice of evil, whether a Temple is absolved from punishment, or whether a Justine is dangerously pendulous between the two, there cannot be any escape from the judge within. At a moment when life seems to offer all, the policeman within will not loosen, even just a little, the manacles he has put on the soul. At such a time the prizes one sought offer little consolation, and all that remains is an impugning Conscience, accusing, convicting as it were:

Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am.  
Then fly. What, from myself? Great reason why,  
Lest I revenge. What, myself upon myself?  
Alack, I love myself. Wherefore? For any good  
That I myself have done unto myself?  
O, no! alas, I rather hate myself.  
My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,  
. . . crying all, Guilty! guilty.

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<sup>7</sup>Alfred Kazin, "On Native Grounds," quoted by Frederick J. Hoffman, "Introduction," William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism, p. 23.

Here in Shakespeare's King Richard III, we find a convincing affirmation of the situation, of the interdependency of ourselves with our conscience which Wharton, Dreiser and Faulkner each conveys in his own unique way.

Another feature worth note is that both Wharton and Faulkner have implicit faith in the salve of religion. They believe in salvation through suffering and repentance. However fallen one may be, there is always the possibility of a return, of a renewal affected through the conscience. In the case of Lily, Nancy and Temple, when there is awareness of the eternal chastisement of conscience, there is a dedication to the transcendent fount of morality, the fount also of the sacred mystery of human destiny leading to the hidden and towards which the divinity in us summons.

Wharton had a strong faith that man will find solace in the morality offered by Christian science and Christian tenets. In a passage she speaks of her "reverence for an ordered ritual in which the officiant's personality is strictly subordinated to the rite he performs."<sup>8</sup> Faulkner was no less a believer in the redeeming power of Christian Religion. There is a wealth of meaning in Nancy's one-word message to the world, "Believe." However Faulkner's approach to Christianity was like that of the purist who hates and despises the forms that vitiate the spirit. A religion which drives people "to

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<sup>8</sup> Edith Wharton, A Backward Glance, p. 10.

a crucifixion of themselves and one another,"<sup>9</sup> which turns a Ruby out into the streets, only results in destroying the spirit of religion. Religion for Faulkner is not a series of rituals or a system of shibboleths. It resides in mutual love, goodwill and brotherhood, in the Upanishadic dharma — the performance of one's duties. Says Faulkner, "My belief that man will prevail is like the belief that one has in God, Buddha . . . . Man has survived in spite of all the anguishes and griefs which he himself has invented and seems to continue to invent."<sup>10</sup> These are thoroughly secular assertions; they require no dependence upon religious assumption, but merely demonstrate a humanistic confidence.

Dreiser, however, did not in the beginning believe in salvation through suffering or repentance. For his characters, death — an unredeemed, unglorified, mean kind of death was the ultimate punishment. For Wharton and Faulkner's protagonists, there was always a world beyond, a time to right one's errors. For Dreiser, the present was the only reality. However, in the last years of his life, Dreiser moved a little closer to religion. Solon Barnes' unswerving belief in "religion and the Creative Force" as also the conviction that when man asks Him for it, "God does not fail,"<sup>11</sup> grants

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<sup>9</sup>William Faulkner, Light in August, p. 347.

<sup>10</sup>William Faulkner, quoted by Hoffman, William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism, p. 30.

<sup>11</sup>Dreiser, The Bulwark, p. 334.

him peace in his later years. Beatrice's belief in the service of fellow-beings as a means to attaining "equanimity and self-control," as also the Titan's anguished cry for "Nirvana! Nirvana!" prove beyond doubt that Dreiser's doubts and religious skepticism had completely vanished. Seeking Holy Communion on the last Good Friday of his life, Dreiser had endorsed his earlier view,

Personally I do not know what can save  
humanity, unless it is the amazing Creative  
Force which has brought 'Humanity' into being. 12

The setback which man has suffered in the present age is a result of losing the purpose supplied by traditional Christian belief. When belief held firm, an ultimate purpose for everyone's life was given in the certain assurance of an after-life. But now, the advance of science has weakened that certainty. The future no longer happens. It is consciously made by our scientists. Moral principles have come to be scorned as unrealistic or unscientific or simply meaningless. There is not much respect for moral character left per se. This is, as I have indicated the tragedy of our age. Our ideals are the conquering superpower, the successful speculator,, the ingenious scientist, the skilful gangster, the clever politician, or the organizing industrialist. Such an attitude on our part is largely responsible for an increase in individual desocialization, alienation and stress; in the delinquency figures, the drift to drugs, apathy, "character

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<sup>12</sup>Dreiser, A Letter to Mencken, March 27, 1943.

disorders," feelings of purposelessness and lost significance, wanton destructiveness, arms race, despair, suicide.

The core of the problem is that the rapid process of change to which men are struggling to adapt themselves has knocked away the very props in which people throughout history have found support. It is not through idealizing the past or heaping blame on present failures that we can tackle the moral crisis of our age. It is for our literary leaders to recreate the past, to rebuild the devastated moral props, the "pillars to help [man] endure and prevail."<sup>13</sup>

We have to remember that development of science will not limit man's need for moral choice. The eager appetite for experience, the discontent from wanting more of life, is the very essence of being human. Given the choice, most people would prefer the uncertainties of the "beautiful, strange, wild, unpredictable world" to the smoothness of a synthetic paradise in which every need was foreseen and dealt with and every need not foreseen was gently coaxed into oblivion as soon as it emerged. Modern science will rather give rise to new moral choices. When is an individual to be considered dead? Under what conditions should organs be available for transplant? Again, if only one kidney or one heart is available and two people are in dire need, by what criteria should the surgeon judge who shall have it? Suppose, for example, the choice were between a young widower with children and a

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<sup>13</sup>William Faulkner, The Stockholm Address, 1950.

middle-aged eye specialist with an international reputation? Similar moral choices will be required when the need comes for choosing the sex of babies, of duplicating human beings, of the whole developing world of genetic engineering. Donald Gould, the editor of New Scientist, rightly says that "this new world of unexpected choices must have a moral philosophy to go along with it."<sup>14</sup>

This moral philosophy is what our writers of modern fiction, Wharton, Dreiser and Faulkner have tried to provide us with. They have shown man, through their various works, how to discover himself, evolve for himself a moral code and standard within his capacities and aspirations, by giving him matchless examples of suffering and sacrifice and the promise of hope.

A comparative study of the treatment of man's moral choice by these writers of the twentieth century shows that although they imbue their rebellious protagonists with tragic intensity and grandeur, yet fulfillment and contentment is denied them, as it is denied to men in real life when they aspire to rise above the limits set by God and their own Inner Voice. Behind the desire for soaring above the constraints of society and duty, these writers detect the heart throbbing with fear, and yearning to "belong to the flock on earth." Aspiration is admirable but limits should be recognized. Further, an assertion of self does not necessarily mean the

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<sup>14</sup> Donald Gould, Radio Broadcast, VOA, February 14, 1968.

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defeated by prejudice, where an innocent Goodwin can be condemned to death and a Temple offered the sympathies of the court. "How can we corrupt an ethical man?" asks Peabody for Jefferson Pettigrew (p. 26), and the answer is the building of the courthouse in the name of Jefferson. That corruption assumes the magnitude of an entire concept is the irony.

The courthouse is a living testimony to the rule by letter rather than by spirit, and it is ironic that an institution dedicated to the preservation of law should grow out of corruption. Thus, from its very inception there is moral contradiction involved in the courthouse. It is both the symbol of man's dream of moral perfection and the cause of the dream's destruction. The only function it performs is that of housing old legal documents which are themselves a reminder of legalized injustice, of men's exploitation and oppression of other men. Thus, the courthouse which ought to have been the symbol of law and order, progress and civilization is reduced to becoming a reminder of the fact that the "the whole race of man, as long as it endured, [had] forever and irrevocably fifteen dollars deficit, fifteen dollars in the red" (p. 36). Punishment becomes as abstract and arbitrary as the law it purports to implement.

Requiem's second mythic section is entitled "The Golden Dome." Like the county courthouse, the dome of the state capitol in Jackson symbolizes a lawful and orderly confederation of men. Faulkner ironically says that the days of anarchic freedom are past while implying that the past forever persists. However, man can no longer afford to live



choice of his characters, but their fates provide their own tragic commentary. In picturing the human dilemma as he sees it, he unwittingly reveals the consequences of choices and commitments that are evil.

The fact that he sees "humanity only in terms of its aberrations," shows us how much Faulkner distrusts the various forms of evil manifest in man. The subtle nemesis that his characters experience is a warning to man against unbridled indulgence in his evil tendencies. Requiem clearly presents the possibility ~~of~~ redemption for Gowan and Temple through acceptance of suffering for their sins — a "chalice of grace" undoubtedly. There is definite promise of redemption for Nancy and Gavin through the strength of their faith in Divine Justice.

As for Light in August (1939), though the book does show us the "full range of Faulkner's discontent," it also offers means for its assuagement. Faulkner, perhaps more than any other novelist of his time, is supremely conscious of his moral responsibility as a tragic, committed artist. Catharsis is as much present in Light in August as in his other books. In fact, it is presented in much more complex terms in this book. He attempts to make us pity, identify ourselves with and love a man who should be rejected not only by social mores but by any humane standard. Faulkner tries to awaken compassion for Joe, the wilful egoist, rapist and murderer, by a recognition of universal guilt and mutual responsibility in the reader. Joe deserves and receives moral justice. But Faulkner wants us to judge not with

evoke from others, a generous, passive response that outrides their social condemnation of her sinful act. Mrs. Armstid, Byron Bunch, the many others who offer her food, transport and shelter are testimony to her gentle virtues and inherent goodness.

Lena succeeds where Joe fails because she chooses to assert her faith in goodness and in her own self and because she ignores any social or moral categories that hamper her faith. Joe fails because he lacks faith in his own capacity for good, and thus seeks retreat in choosing not to choose. Social and moral distinctions are the most important distinctions for him in life. Thus while Joe strengthens the barriers between himself and others, Lena destroys them. Where Joe threatens life with extinction, Lena becomes the means of its renewal and continuance. In the words of Hightower, Joe is symbolic with "adjuration, threat and doom," Lena with the church's steeples "sky pointed with ecstasy and passion." The Lena Grove episode is bathed in warm sunlight throughout and filled with images of eternity, affirmation and regeneration. The title, resonant with meaning, is associated with the moral illumination of Joe Christmas and Hightower, with the latter's re-entry into life and with his reawakened sensitivity to the beauty and fecundity of the world. But most of all it is associated with the warm-life glow which haloes Lena, symbolic of her fruitful life and promised salvation.

Thus, there is a definite pattern of guilt and expiation in the book, a definite sense of catharsis and a realistic

whether their rebellion is against bourgeois norms or the very fact of society itself. Their behaviour defies social conventions and those moral codes which consider the institutions of marriage and the family as sacred. They wrongly think that conformity to codes makes man mechanized, reducing true love to an adjunct of the individual's efficiency as an economic agent. In thus destroying the balance between man, nature and society, they destroy their very ideal of love. In hoping to nurture it away from nature and civilization, they glorify only its physical aspect, subordinating its sublime quality. Charlotte's and Harry's relationship is therefore primarily, programmatically physical; only the clash of bodies they feel to be an act free of social deceit. As Howe points out, though admirable and courageous enough to take chances, vital enough to strain for a release of suppressed energies, they yet deceive themselves by the idea that an "unencumbered act of natural living, an embrace of the sun can be a sufficient means toward personal fulfillment."<sup>32</sup> They therefore, trap themselves in a frozen gesture of protest, beyond which they cannot move. A fanatic grasping for freedom against the restrictions of society leads them to reject some of its most enduring values also. As soon as they begin eating regularly they wonder if they are not in danger of sliding back into bourgeois complacency. Poverty, isolation, deprivation — all these are mere

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<sup>32</sup>Irving Howe, William Faulkner: A Critical Study (New York: Vintage, 1952), p.

through the fates of his characters which provide their own tragic commentary, often without intervention from the narrator. In each case a choice made against the moral norms of society offers pain, humiliation and anguish, while the one made in accordance with the dictates of time-honoured conventions leads to peace and contentment. Often critical of the "existing" norms, these writers advocated "eternal norms." Thus Ethan, Cowperwood and Joe Christmas have only an endless saga of pain as their lot, whereas Newland, Beatrice and Lena can look back on happy moments and ahead to peace and fulfillment.

Even spiritual yearning is not to be permitted to override moral considerations. The yearning for true love in an Ethan, the clamour for the fulfillment of an artistic urge in a Carrie, or the wild quest for the realization of an ideal in a Charlotte, is equally reprehensible when sought to be achieved at the expense of moral obligations. The only situation in which these obligations may be justifiably superseded is when the supersession serves a higher truth — that which occupies the exalted position of a divine absolute. A Justine, a Jennie or a Nancy may deserve to be convicted in courts of legal justice or moral law; they may — and do — suffer their inevitable fates at the hands of "those who sit in judgement"; yet in their portrayal, the writers show tolerant acceptance of their "lapses," even a mute approbation.

In each case society emerges the winner, closing in like a Roman wall around the Newland Archers and the Ethan Fromes. A realization of the "monstrousness of useless sacrifices" encourages the characters' selfish, passionate bent,